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A CAPPELLO

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BIANCA CAPPELLO

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BIANCA CAPPELLO, GRAND DUCHESS OF TUSCANY

From a portrait in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence

BIANCA CAPPELLO

BY

MARY G. STEEGMANN

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FOREWORD

Of all the cities which for centuries had maintained their independence there were, at that period of intellectual upheaval and striking contradictions known as the Renaissance, two of the utmost importance in the story of man's development in knowledge and power, namely Florence, the city of eternal movement, and Venice, the city of apparent inaction and political silence. These two stand out in vivid contrast to each other, and neither in their history nor in their outward aspect is there any other place in the world to compare with them.

Florence, by the lovely flower-strewn banks of Arno, encircled by her hills, whose slopes were dark with evergreen woods and whose summits were covered for many months of the year with snow, was the centre, the very focus of all that was brilliant and new in literature, in art, in intellect, and the battlefield of strongly conflicting political parties. But advancement and learning, whether for her own especial benefit or that of universal humanity, was her most living interest, her chief, absorbing aim.

Venice, silent and stately in her wide lagoons, protected from the fiercest storms of the open sea by her long chain of islands curving away north and south through the luminous Adriatic, was a great state by reason of her government and commerce, but her very pride kept her backward in that culture which was then held to be of paramount importance. She had held somewhat contemptuously aloof from the enthusiastic revival of humanism which had spread over the rest of Italy, deeming that her citizens should devote their minds and energies to the

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business of the Republic rather than to vain literature and intellectual progress, which would benefit other states equally with their own. The study of the classics was pursued by a few nobles, but it did not attract the upper classes in general nor in any way affect the tone of society. Nevertheless, Venice, with her range of glorious palaces side by side on the curved sweep of her Grand Canal or towering sombre and majestic over some dark and narrow *rio*, her gay and sunny squares, her busy, crowded alleys, her black gondolas and brown-sailed boats floating on the shining waters that ripple at her marble steps, always was and ever will remain one of the most historically interesting cities of the world, the cradle of mystery and romance. And here, indeed, history and fiction go hand-in-hand, and literature, painting and architecture have made their memories immortal. Of the figures who peopled the streets and squares in the past it is hard to distinguish the real from the unreal; Shylock and Portia and Antonio stand side by side with blind Doge Dandolo, the Foscari and Falier; each palace may be the one whence Desdemona fled, although the chronicles of the house bear no mention of her name. But the glory of Venice has vanished; the lapping water has covered the palace steps with weeds and slime, and the noble rooms within are put to base uses whereat the poor ghosts who once dwelt there must weep with rage. Still, the old charm is there and leads the mind irresistibly to wonder who and what were these ghosts when they lived and had their being.

Perhaps of no other people in Italy is there so much information extant concerning their private life as of the Venetians. Historians and scholars like Cicogna, Carrer, Romanin, Fulin, Federigo Stefani, Berchet, and Molmenti have collected records and reconstructed the life of various periods with scrupulous fidelity and wealth of detail. There are official documents and the memoirs and diaries of contemporaries, who noted down daily events and opinions; travellers left descriptions of the manners and customs

which struck them most in a foreign city, and the paintings of the long list of Venetian artists, especially of Carpaccio, Giorgione, Titian and Paul Veronese (no matter what scene, according to their titles, they are supposed to represent), faithfully reflect the cities and country, the features and costumes of the men and women, often even the domestic arrangements of their own times.

But these glimpses of the past are solely of the outward lives of the Venetians; they are seen collectively, as it were, never singly, and this applies more particularly to the women. Books describe the general outline of their lives; pictures portray women of the people at their daily toil in the narrow streets or on the water, famous beauties dyeing and combing their hair on the terraces of their houses, or great patrician dames making rare appearances in public, at festivals or marriages or on occasions of national importance, splendidly dressed, brilliant with jewels, adorned to please the eye of some prince or illustrious personage whom the Republic delighted to honour. But of their individual lives, their personal influence on their fellowmen and women nothing is known.

It is on this point that the history of Venice differs from that of other countries. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance only four types of women were recognised—the saint, the princess, the courtesan, and, rarest of all, the literary woman, and only prominent examples even in these classes were generally heard of. But Venice, with a few exceptions, was curiously lacking in women of individual prominence both before and during the Renaissance. Other Italian cities had their heroines, a Caterina Sforza, an Isabella d'Este, a Giovanna of Arragon, and most countries of Europe could boast of their famous women. In Venice in the fifteenth century there had been Caterina Cornaro, Daughter of the Republic, Queen of Cyprus, but celebrated rather as an unfortunate puppet of the state than for her own individual qualities; and there had been Cassandra Fedele, poetess and musician, noted for her intellect, her knowledge of ancient

languages and her eloquence; but these are solitary examples. A few names of the wives of doges or great nobles have been preserved, it is true, ladies whose appearance at some public function in all the bravery of their gala dress made such an impression on the beholder that he straightway immortalised their beauty, coupled with extravagant and symbolical praise, in those *canzoni* or sonnets which were so characteristic a product of the period; but for posterity they are mere shadows, of no interest or importance.

There was, however, one Venetian woman of the sixteenth century whose name became known throughout all Italy, and who raised herself, unaided save by her own exertions and her extraordinary gifts of beauty and intelligence, to the highest position in the state of her adoption. But it is not in the annals of her native city that her history is to be found. Though she was a Venetian by family and birth, the cleverest woman ever born in the City in the Sea, her association with her native place was severed early and for ever, and it was on Tuscan history that she set her mark for good or ill, in Florence that her story must be traced.

Although she spent her childhood and girlhood in Venice, so rich in memoirs and documents, contemporary records of Bianca Cappello are there sought for in vain; the story of the first sixteen years of her life is a blank that has only been filled in by later or circumstantial evidence and by knowledge of Venetian internal affairs at that period. The reason for this is simple enough. All early records were destroyed by her father in his first anger at the disgrace he considered she had brought upon the family, and later evidence was suppressed or declared untrue by the Senate after Bianca's death, with the intention of propitiating the new Grand Duke of Tuscany, the ex-Cardinal Ferdinando de Medici.

But whatever the conditions may have been in Venice, in other states of Italy it was a time when the influence and power of women in many respects equalled that of men, in

some ways even surpassed it. For if on one side there was physical strength and actual authority, on the other side there was that subtler force which knew how to bend that masculine strength and authority to its own ends.

It is difficult to form a just conception of the personality of the dominating woman of Renaissance Italy. In the typical lady of high position produced by that age, good manners, beauty, education and piety combined to form one harmonious whole. The intellectual training she received engendered and fostered a strong individuality; spirit, courage and mental powers were united with feminine charm, and all external aids of dress and adornment were employed to enhance personal beauty, or in some measure to atone for the lack of it. The girl of high birth enjoyed an education equal to her brother's, and strove like him to attain perfection, intellectual, spiritual and physical; and the most notable quality in the great Italian women of that time was the masculine energy and resource which enabled them, when need arose, to do manly deeds both in warfare and politics. Yet of female emancipation, as the term is understood to-day, there was no question. Actual activity, save in exceptional cases, was not asked of women, not even literary activity. All that men looked for in them was a mind capable of understanding all things and an outward appearance that should delight all eyes, and women's aim was to impress and attract great men and through them to make their own influence felt. To the general public these great ladies paid no attention at all. It cannot be said, perhaps, that they fulfilled the modern and conventional ideal of womanliness, but the age that produced them was not conventional. The consciousness of their power raised them above all small and hampering restrictions, while pride, as a rule, kept them within bounds of womanly dignity, though great exceptions to this rule are, unfortunately, not lacking.

But human types, like the arts, wax and wane and deteriorate with the times that produced them. Bianca Cappello

may be called a typical woman of the late Renaissance; but a type, be it understood, of what a clever and not too scrupulous woman could become and achieve when spurred by necessity and ambition, and when not afraid to seize and turn to her own advantage every opportunity offered by chance or circumstance. Hers was a character which could only develop, hers a career which could only be successfully carried out at that period, when the utmost refinement and luxury went hand-in-hand with crime and cruelty, when art had reached its highest point of glory and immorality had sunk to its lowest depth. In tracing her story it is not only her personal character which must be taken into consideration, but the character of the age itself; not only the peculiar circumstances of her life, but the circumstances of the city and the times in which she lived. She was the product of her day and of her land, and her land was Italy of the sixteenth century. When she was born, the splendour of the Renaissance was on the wane; high ideals had been corrupted, personal liberty had degenerated into licence, and Italy was chafing under the yoke of Spain, yet not perceiving how to throw it off. And if the story of Bianca's life reflects in the main but small credit either on the principal actors or the two cities which were the scenes of her adventures, the social and political conditions which made such a story possible must not be forgotten in the reading of it, nor the exceptional circumstances of her individual fortune.

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CHAPTER I

THE VENETIAN

It was during the dukedom of Nicolò da Ponte that Bianca Cappello was born in Venice, in the house then inhabited by her family, a fine building in Moorish-Gothic style and situated at the corner of the Ponte Storto, or 'crooked bridge,' near the church of Sant' Apollinare. On one side was a small canal, or *rivo*, named Carampane, and on the other side flowed another canal which was afterwards filled in, but which at this period was crossed by a wooden bridge, affording the only means of access to the house.

Bianca's father, Bartolommeo Cappello, came of an old and honourable Venetian family belonging to the minor nobility. His forbears had nearly all held public offices; his father and grandfather had been highly respected senators of the Republic, and Bartolommeo himself held a subordinate post in the government. To more than this he had never attained, for he was recognised as both a tiresome and a dangerous character, a vain man of but small merit, who assumed airs of importance for the sake of impressing others with his greatness. Self-aggrandisement and personal profit were his chief aims in life, and his lack of wealth made him always endeavour to derive private advantage from public affairs. Indeed, as his whole subsequent behaviour with regard to his daughter showed, greed and vanity were his ruling passions.

In 1544 Bartolommeo had married Pellegrina Morosini, a woman of great beauty, who bore him two children, Vettore in 1547 and Bianca in 1548. What happiness she could have found with a man of self-seeking character and

principles whose moral standard varied according to circumstances, it is hard to say; but the lessons of uprightness which the gentle Pellegrina tried to instil into her children were of short duration, for she died early, and the loss of her love and example made all the difference in the world to the young creatures she left behind. Had she lived, her daughter's career would probably have been very different, for Bianca's later letters testify that she attributed her first mistakes to the fact that she had had no mother and had been left to the hard rule of a stranger. And it is an indisputable fact that at a critical moment of her life, when she hesitated between good and ill, her decision and actions were largely influenced by the remembrance of her girlhood's experience in her father's house.

The earlier years of Bianca's childhood were happy, however, for until his second marriage Bartolommeo proved himself an indulgent, or perhaps a careless father, and allowed his daughter far more liberty than was usual for children of her rank, and greater intimacy with himself and the rest of the family.

The little girl knew nothing of character or principles; she only knew that when she cried for her mother, her father would grant her indulgences she had not had before. She could run about the great house with her brother and be petted and amused by guests and relatives, or be taken by her attendants for walks along the Riva or excursions in her father's gondola, her childish eyes and already active mind enthralled by the busy scenes of canal and street and square. Then there were her two cousins, Andrea and Giacomo Cappello, older than herself, whose pleasure it was to bring into the motherless child's life as much delight as in their power lay.

All this was good enough, and might have been very well had it lasted. But a drastic change was in store for Bianca.

Bartolommeo's public and private affairs left him no time for vain grieving, and he had to bethink himself of finding

a way out of the difficulty in which his wife's death had placed him. Boys could be brought up by tutors, but a house where there was a daughter needed a woman at the head. For this reason, and also because he saw a chance of forming a new connection which would be of advantage to him in his useless striving after public honours, Bartolommeo married again a year after Pellegrina's death and his second wife was Lucrezia Grimani, widow of Andrea Contarini, and sister of the Patriarch of Aquileia. Wealthy, proud, no longer young, plain of feature, bad of heart and vindictive, she had only married Bartolommeo for the sake of being again at the head of a household, and she was a woman in every way calculated to thwart by needless harshness all that was good and to develop all that was bad in a child's character.

And, unfortunately, the child with whom Lucrezia now had to deal was of temperament and intelligence far from ordinary, one whose character needed both wise restraint and loving indulgence.

Bianca was a girl of singular charm and by the time she was sixteen years old she had almost reached the perfection of physical beauty, for even Italians of the north come early to maturity. Her full figure had all the curves and buoyancy of youth and her face its soft and brilliant colouring, and the middle-aged Lucrezia was furiously jealous of this radiant, golden-haired step-daughter—jealous of her youth and beauty, jealous of the pride her father showed in her whenever he found it convenient to remember her existence. She had resented the unusual liberty Bartolommeo was disposed to allow the girl, and directly after her marriage she had her removed to apartments in the upper part of the house, with attendants specially told off to wait upon her and an old woman as duenna; which old woman, however, as events proved, had no very strict views on the performance of her duties. The only persons who had free access at all times to Bianca were this matron Giovanna, the wife of Gian Donato de' Longhi da Cittadella, her daughter

Maria, and Marietta the waiting-woman, the wife of Girolamo, the gondolier attached to the family, who dwelt in a small house adjoining his master's palazzo.

Now had begun for Bianca a life very different from the freedom she had enjoyed during her father's widowerhood. And yet, theoretically, she could not complain, for the seclusion in which her stepmother kept her was, after all, only the ordinary life of the young girl of her time and country.

However great their liberty in other parts of Italy, in Venice in the sixteenth century high-born maidens were still kept in almost oriental seclusion. Married women certainly had various privileges and liberties and might find life amusing enough, but for unmarried girls it was very different. The custom of educating the daughters of noble families in convents was not yet generally established and the Venetian girl, even when past the age of childhood, was kept practically a prisoner in her father's house. Destined for a marriage which would be advantageous for her family, but concerning which her opinion would not be asked, her imagination must be kept a blank, her desires unawakened, and hence she was deprived of the distractions and even of the luxury and comfort enjoyed by the other members of the family. She had her own apartments, usually high up in the large and lofty mansion and remote from those occupied by her relatives, and here she spent her days in the company of her attendants and strictly guarded, as Bianca was supposed to be, by an elderly duenna. Of occupations she had but few to vary the monotony of her life, and the chief of these was needlework, copying from those exquisite books of designs which appeared during the Cinquecento and provided the patrician maiden with patterns for the wonderful laces and embroidery destined for the ornamentation of her bridal garments. At certain fixed hours she would perform her religious duties in company with her women, reciting prayers such as the *Salve Regina*, *Ave Maris Stella*, or the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, and reading the books of devotion which formed

almost her only literature. The Venetian girl seldom set foot outside the house, even to go to church, for most of the big palaces had their own oratories. Only at Christmas and Easter she attended the parish church, but always strictly guarded and wearing the traditional costume. This consisted of a black dress and a fine white silk veil, which latter was fastened to the back of the head and thrown back in the house, but in the street it was drawn over the face and shoulders, descending as far as the breast and entirely hiding the wearer's features, though permitting her to see perfectly. The only jewellery allowed was perhaps some small pearl ornament or necklace of little value. These rare walks through the narrow streets to church were almost the only outings granted to this domestic prisoner, and even her nearest male relatives were only permitted to see her in the presence of her parents.

Even under these conditions Bianca might have been happy and contented if only her natural guardians had been better fitted for the management of her unusual character and beauty. But Lucrezia was jealous and spiteful and enforced every possible detail of domestic tyranny which custom allowed, and Bartolommeo was too selfish or too much influenced by his wife to exert his authority on his daughter's behalf. And gradually, as she grew from childhood to girlhood, more and more bitterly did Bianca resent her stepmother's treatment of her, more wildly did she chafe at the monotony and restrictions of her daily life and long for freedom. She knew that her father ought to find a husband for her. She wanted to discard her maiden veil and wear her rippling golden curls loose upon her shoulders or decked high with jewels, as married women did; she wanted to dress in the gorgeous costumes and varied colours of the prevailing fashion, to go down amongst men and women and find an outlet for her young energy, satisfaction for her innocent vanity. Except her brother Vettore, her cousins Andrea and Giacomo Cappello, who remained her friends and partisans through-

out all the adventures of her later life, were the only young persons with whom she was allowed to be on terms of anything approaching intimacy, the only young men with whom she might exchange a word. But full well Bianca knew herself fitted to play her part in the life outside, well she knew that her face would bear comparison with the fairest in that world of pleasure and action in which a place should have been hers by right. She listened eagerly to every breath of news and bade her maids collect and repeat to her accounts of the festivities in which she longed to join. Boredom, inaction and lack of active happiness work havoc in any young thing of average intelligence, but doubly so when the intelligence is above the average and the child is conscious of its powers. The few rooms of her apartment, the three womenfolk who waited on her, formed too narrow a kingdom for Bianca. Constantly she sought for a means of issuing from her dull seclusion, and, since marriage was the only way of escape she knew of and love the only distraction, she cast her eyes round for a likely deliverer (a deliverer whom her father should have provided for her long ago), and consoled herself meanwhile with day-dreams in which the brilliance of her future was to more than compensate for the dulness of the present.

Bianca sighed for adventures, and she had not long to wait before an opportunity to engage in one presented itself. And this very first adventure changed the whole course of her life, made her notorious in history as a brilliant, if sinister, example of the women of the Renaissance, and prominent for ever in the annals of successful wrongdoing and the ranks of those strange witch-women whom few men have ever known how to resist.

CHAPTER II

THE FLORENTINE

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the Florentines were practically the bankers of Europe and had established agencies in all principal cities, ready to supply large loans to every class of borrower, from crowned heads downwards. Estates were retrieved, businesses maintained and wars were fought through their means, and it was, indeed, with the aid of Florentine gold, amounting to half a million of our money, that Edward III. won the victory of Creçy. The foremost families of Tuscany openly pursued the business of bankers and money-lenders, either possessing their own banking-houses or making their profits by advancing large sums to their countrymen, even the princes themselves looking upon it as a legitimate method of adding to their revenues. In 1422, in the square of the Mercato Nuovo alone there were seventy-two offices of bankers or money-changers, most of whom had agencies in other financial centres of Italy. Cosimo I. did great business with bankers, both for the advantage of the State and for his own private profit, obtaining extensive loans with which he traded in grain and other native products, and in imported minerals, to the disadvantage of his subjects, few of whom possessed the means of carrying on such extensive commercial operations.

Amongst the more important of the Florentine banking-houses was that belonging to the Salviati, one of the first families of Florence. In the year 1563 their branch in Venice was established in a corner house by the Ponte Storto, exactly opposite the Palazzo Cappello, and was

under the management of a worthy Florentine named Giambattista Bonaventuri. Although only working in the service of others, he was noted as a reliable and capable man of business and was, indeed, one of the many secret agents in various cities with whom Duke Cosimo regularly corresponded.

The Bonaventuri were an old Florentine family who had originally been counted among the nobility and had been banished from the city as Ghibellines in 1267, but had subsequently returned and settled down again under another name, as did many others at the same time. They had once possessed great wealth, but when the head of the family died in 1563 and his property was divided amongst his five sons, there was not much for each one to inherit. One of these sons, Ser Zanobi, was practising as a notary in Florence, and to him, as his share of the patrimony, fell a small estate and house near Pontassieve, together with some other land. The income derived from these possessions, added to what he earned by his profession, placed him above the reach of want, although, in view of his numerous family, he was far from being rich, or even comfortably off. These straitened means, therefore, made him glad to send one of his sons to be under the care of his more well-to-do brother, the bank manager in Venice.

Young Piero Bonaventuri, who had been given a position as cashier in the bank and had speedily gained one for himself in his uncle's affections, was a handsome youth of engaging manners and boundless impudence, clever and an excellent business man when he chose to work, but infinitely preferring a life of pleasure, for which he found no lack of opportunities in the pleasant city of Venice. Well dressed, far too well for his purse and position, amply provided with money which he obtained by gambling or by appeals to his uncle's generosity, he was generally supposed by his associates to be a member of the noble Salviati family, instead of merely the nephew of their paid servant; and he took no pains to correct this mistake, but assumed the airs

and cultivated the companions suitable to his supposed rank. He was everlastingly engaged in intrigues and love-affairs, scaling the balcony of some notorious courtesan at night or impudently following some great lady by day, and endless were the difficulties and dangers into which his imprudence led him, the handsome young rake being often called upon to fight half a dozen duels in as many days. The worthy Giambattista's patience was wellnigh exhausted, but warnings and reproofs were alike unheeded; and thus matters stood when Piero became engaged in a fresh adventure which brought things to a crisis.

Giambattista and his nephew lived together in apartments over the bank, the windows of which faced those of the Palazzo Cappello on the other side of the narrow canal. Lucrezia Grimani kept a jealous watch over the hated stepdaughter and no visitor could reach her by the stairway without permission. But apparently it never occurred to her that rooms have windows as well as doors and that the restless young beauty, fretting away the long summer days on her shaded, flower-covered balcony, might perchance encounter from across the strip of slowly moving water, glances that were but as sparks to kindle the fires ready to flame up in that discontented soul. But so it happened. From his own balcony in the Salviati house Piero Bonaventuri first saw Bianca in the summer of 1563 and very quickly discovered who she was; and discovered too, (infinitely the most important fact in his eyes), that she had inherited a fortune of six thousand ducats from her mother, to be paid over to her on her marriage.

To the amorously inclined young Florentine a pretty face was irresistible, and the more difficult an enterprise the more eager was he to embark on it. It certainly seemed a wild and impossible scheme to attempt the conquest of this jealously guarded patrician girl, but love was not the only reason that made Bianca and her fortune a tempting prey. Piero, as has been said, was desirous of all the comforts wealth bestows, but in nowise did it enter into his plans for

the future that the aim of his ambition should be achieved by honest work. Deliberate dishonesty which would bring him within reach of the law was no part of his scheme either, but at this particular moment he was in great difficulties; he had come alike to the end of his resources and of his uncle's patience, and the sight of Bartolommeo's daughter upon her balcony suddenly revealed to him a plan for the mending of his fortunes as base as it was audacious.

Piero knew well enough that a marriage between the daughter of a Venetian patrician, the most fiercely exclusive of all European nobles, and a penniless bank clerk would be regarded as the ravings of a madman. But he knew also that there are other ways of obtaining a father's consent to a marriage than by asking politely for it, and though the way he proposed to take seemed beset with insurmountable difficulties, it was just these, as well as the hope of ultimate success, which made it so attractive. He was an expert hunter of this sort of quarry and liked the interest of the chase, though he had hitherto never failed to run it to earth. What it felt like to be winged with his own shot he had yet to learn. The question of the morality of his plan did not trouble this young adventurer at all. But in making these calculations Piero underrated the pride of the Venetian aristocracy and of Bartolommeo Cappello in particular, who would rather have killed his daughter with his own hands than give her to such a low-born husband, even to hide the consequences of betrayal. And had he but guessed the height to which Piero dared to aspire, that young man's career in Venice would have come to a sudden end, if, indeed, he had been spared to encumber the earth at all.

Now Bianca was no fool, and was, moreover, one of those, early ripe, in whom instinct often takes the place of experience. But the seclusion in which she had been brought up had left her ignorant of life and the ways of men, and during this first summer no suspicion of trickery entered her mind. She had fallen desperately in love with the handsome youth who threw her amorous looks and

kisses from the opposite balcony and whose appearance infused a lively interest into the monotonous lives of the four women who were in the secret. It was naturally impossible for Bianca to hide her adventure from her attendants; and it would also have been useless, for they were devoted to her, and what women of their time and station would not have sided with young lovers against a harsh step-mother? Very soon they understood that a meeting must be contrived at closer quarters than across the deep canal, and when Bianca went to church attended by her duenna and maid, a note slipped into her hand in the crowd declared plainly the passion hitherto expressed by signs. Then she saw her lover in the full light of day; she saw him richly dressed, in the company of youths whom she knew to be of good family, and fully believing him to be what he pretended, a nephew of the noble Salviati possessing a large share in the bank, she saw no danger in according him the interview for which he prayed. Although wholly possessed by this first youthful passion, which had ambition and perhaps some measure of girlish curiosity to back it up, Bianca was not one even at this age to take such a step without having first weighed the consequences so far as she could foresee them. But she knew that marriage was the only way by which she could escape from Lucrezia's tyranny; if marriage could be combined with love, so much the better for her, and surely a noble Florentine was worth a Venetian, a Salviati as good as a Cappello.

Thus reasoned Bianca, even now quick to grasp and judge a situation and its results, and meanwhile her persuasions and Piero's bribes corrupted her father's servants into forgetting their duty. Messages were carried between the pair, false keys were made for the doors, and one night in September, when illness had made Lucrezia a temporary prisoner in a distant part of the house, the lover was secretly admitted to his lady's rooms. At first old Giovanna and her daughter were present, trembling with the fear of discovery, and Piero was full of respect and gratitude for

the favour granted. But such interviews as these were not what he aimed at; he must obtain a definite hold over his prize. He exerted all his powers of persuasion and reassurance, and Bianca now had neither strength nor will to resist. In the presence of the attendant women the young lovers (Piero was twenty-five and Bianca sixteen) exchanged rings and promise of marriage, and thereafter the false keys admitted him to her room almost every night.

So the weeks passed and summer grew into autumn, and still the secret was kept. Then suddenly Bianca was filled with a vague fear that Lucrezia suspected something and she bade her lover's visits cease. Now it was she who, wrapped in a dark mantle, slipped down the great stairway of the Palazzo Cappello at night and sped noiselessly across the little bridge that spanned the canal, to continue the secret meetings in Piero's room in the Salviati house.

Time passed and winter drew near; the balconies were bare of flowers and cold November mists crept up the lagoons, extinguishing the warmth and brightness of the city in the sea. And now Giambattista Bonaventuri was filled with depression and uneasiness for which the sense of coming winter could not account. Young Piero had grown absent-minded of late, was confused if suddenly questioned, and for once his irrepressible gaiety seemed under a cloud. Wherefore his good uncle suspected that he had been guilty of some escapade more than commonly serious, and made inquiries as to what might have happened.

Unfortunately for Bianca, her secret visits to the Salviati bank had somehow been noticed. Whispers and footfalls heard in the house at night, the door left open when Piero had taken her home at daybreak, some servant abroad too late or too early—in short, Giambattista's inquiries soon brought the truth to light, or at least part of it, and the good man stood appalled at the gravity of the situation. Piero had been wild, but had hitherto committed nothing approaching this piece of madness, which, if discovered, would not only bring ruin on the culprit himself, but also on

all his relatives and those who might be suspected of being his accomplices. And the poor bank manager thought of his own honourable position and reputation, which seemed trembling on the verge of a hopeless downfall through the worse than folly of a youth who owed everything to him.

But Giambattista did not yet know all the facts of the case, and he still hoped, by energetic measures and increased severity towards Piero, to avert the threatened disaster. He tried appeals and then threats, but finding that neither had any effect, he declared that he had no intention of being ruined for the sake of his worthless nephew, and in a burst of natural anger he expelled Piero from the bank and closed his door against him. On reflection, however, Giambattista perceived that the situation was now too serious for anger to have any part in the direction of affairs, and fearing, moreover, that his nephew might commit some fresh and crowning misdeed if left to himself, he sent for him to come home and be under his own eye and safe-keeping.

Piero came home quickly enough, for he had now got too deeply into difficulties to be able to extricate himself unaided. Up to a certain point he had carried out his scheme only too thoroughly, and if now, at the critical moment, unforeseen dangers presented themselves, he could not save himself by flight and leave the girl to bear the punishment alone. Worthless as he was, he was not as bad as that; and moreover, after his fashion, he really loved her. So then Giambattista learnt the full extent of the disaster, and seeing that ruin was inevitable whatever happened, the unfortunate man listened to Piero's appeal for help and consented to be a party to the only course which now seemed open if his nephew's life was to be saved. He knew the penalty for betraying a patrician girl; he knew, too, that Lucrezia's suspicions had at last been aroused and that Bianca's father and brother were ready to avenge the dishonour cast upon the family, and that if Piero escaped with his life it would be by a miracle.

Instant flight was obviously the one chance for the

culprits, and it only remained to find the means and to persuade Bianca to consent. The latter point was not difficult. Bianca's awakening had come too late to save her, and when it did come, it was rough. When her rosy love-dream faded in the cold dawn of reality, when threatened danger became a horrid fact and she and her frightened women realised that for her there was to be no escape from the consequences of those secret meetings, she looked confidently to her lover to declare himself openly and, by asking her in marriage, make all things good again. Only then she learnt who he really was—no wealthy Salviati, but the penniless nephew of the Salviati's servant.

The blow was great; but she was not crushed, this girl of sixteen. She found herself suddenly confronted with the first momentous decision of her life, a decision which was to seal her fate once for all. In spite of her inexperience, Bianca realised very well the gravity of her position. Discovery was inevitable, and practically meant death for Piero if caught; the best fate she herself could hope for if she chose to remain in the hands of her family was lifelong imprisonment in a convent, whilst her child would simply disappear after the manner of inconvenient children of those days. Moreover, it meant separation from her lover—for he was still her lover, in spite of the awakening—separation final and complete. Bianca was afraid, and all her healthy young nature revolted from the fate she knew awaited her if she followed the way of repentance; so she chose the unknown alternative—love with the hope of life, flight with Piero and the uncertainty of the future.

Having once decided, she was not one to draw back. It seemed as though the impulsiveness of youth had been quenched in her and had given place in one night to that strength of mind, that fixity of purpose and determination which marked her character throughout the remainder of her life and enabled her to attain to almost any end she desired, regardless of the obstacles to be overcome. She could make but few preparations for her flight, which was

planned for the first night that Bartolommeo should be absent, and could take little away with her from her father's house. She collected all the money and jewels she could find, packed a few garments into a bundle which she could carry beneath her cloak, and on the night of the 28th November 1563, Bianca Cappello fled from the home she was destined never to see again.

Since the lives and liberty of the young couple seemed the only things it was now possible to save, Giambattista Bonaventuri thrust the thought of his own ruin into the background and helped their flight to the best of his power, the last sacrifice he could make for the nephew who had so ill repaid his love and generosity. He furnished Piero with money for his immediate needs, and when the night came and Bianca's woman warned them that her master was out and that her young mistress would be able to escape from the house unperceived, he set the bank doorway open and waited there with Piero in the darkness until the slender figure wrapped in its dark cloak emerged from the Palazzo opposite and swiftly sped across the bridge to join them. The Salviati bank was, however, the most unsafe of all places for Bianca to hide in, for it would be the first to be searched on the fugitives being missed in the morning. So under cover of the darkness Giambattista immediately took the young people to the house of another Florentine, a money-changer of his acquaintance, who promised secrecy and, for his friend's sake, imperilled his own position by giving them shelter for a few hours.

But there was no time to be lost; the Bonaventuri knew that if they were to escape at all they must be out of Venice before daylight, when Bianca's women could no longer conceal her absence and the hue and cry after her would be raised. But how were they to obtain a gondola in the middle of the night without arousing suspicion? Obviously the only person able to help them at this point was Marietta, who had been in their confidence from the beginning and who must now persuade her husband, the gondolier of the

Palazzo Cappello, to transport them to the mainland without an hour's delay. The friendly money-changer ascertained that husband and wife were both in their cottage, and then Piero and Bianca made their way thither through the dark, deserted streets and threw themselves on the mercy of the gondolier. The man, taken by surprise, urged that his duty bade him refuse; but moved by his wife's entreaties, Bonaventuri's gold and the tears of his master's daughter, whose unexpected appearance in his dwelling at the dead of night had wellnigh confused him, he consented, and ere morning broke over the lagoons Piero and Bianca had set foot on the mainland and were hastening towards Ferrara, for safety lay only beyond the confines of Venetian territory.

CHAPTER III

THE BRIDE'S HOME-COMING

Bianca had chosen her path, and it was fortunate for her that her spirit and resolution had impelled her to instant action and that her secret had not been discovered before she had had time to escape out of her father's hands. For there, most assuredly, her story would have closed and she would have died forgotten, like any other weaker spirit who had not the courage to meet adverse fate boldly, as they would meet a savage dog, and so escape destruction, and whose romance ended in repentance and tame submission.

Bianca's flight caused amazement and consternation in the Palazzo Cappello when she was missed early next morning, and the news spread rapidly through Venice, naturally creating a great sensation. And when the absence of the handsome bank clerk was remarked by his companions later in the day and it was presently discovered that the two absentees had fled together, the sensation was increased a hundredfold. Bartolommeo Cappello was furious at the disgrace he considered had been put upon him, and the Morosini and Grimani families, his kinsmen by marriage, were only a little less indignant. Enraged beyond all measure at such a scandal having befallen the house with which she had allied herself, and also at the escape of her step-daughter out of her hands, Lucrezia urged her husband and brother to prompt and relentless action, though they required little incitement to revenge in this first outburst of rage. The Patriarch of Aquileia was loudest of all in his expressions of indignation and demands for vengeance, declaring that the entire nobility of Venice had been

offended by the insult put upon the Cappello family. And as a proof that his zeal was not confined to mere words, he offered a reward of a thousand ducats out of his private purse for the apprehension of the fugitives, alive or dead, and Bartolommeo immediately promised the same amount. But, strange to say, Bartolommeo's activity confined itself to demanding vengeance and offering a reward, and he left undone that one thing which would, one might suppose, have suggested itself instantly and instinctively to every one under the circumstances, namely, the immediate despatch of swift pursuers to recapture the fugitives. Bianca had fled without any other escort than her lover and they had only had a few hours' start, so it would have been an easy matter to overtake them had he really so desired. But Bartolommeo was much more moved by anger at the way he had been deceived and by the shame put on him in his quality of patrician than by grief at the loss of his daughter, and he thought far more of soothing his own pride than of insuring her safety. Moreover, although furious at having been outwitted by her, Lucrezia certainly did not wish to have the inconvenient step-daughter back on her hands, especially as the manner of her departure from home would probably enable them to confiscate the fortune left her by her mother, Pellegrina Morosini, which fortune would thus remain in the possession of the rapacious Cappello family.

So the fugitives went untracked and safe whilst Bartolommeo, spurred on by his wife's vindictiveness, made loud complaint and energetically demanded their capture and punishment by the Senate. He obtained the assistance of Daniele Venturi and Piero Contarini, both friends and kinsmen of his own, and between them they dragged a full confession of all the circumstances from Giambattista Bonaventuri. For, realising himself and his reputation to be hopelessly ruined, the poor man knew it was worse than useless to conceal anything, and with bitter tears surrendered himself into the hands of his enemies. He was arrested and imprisoned, and the same fate befell old Donna Giovanna

de' Longhi, her husband and daughter, and Marietta the gondolier's wife.

Bartolommeo lost no time, and already on the 4th December he laid before the Council of Ten his formal complaint against the Bonaventuri, uncle and nephew, as thieves and seducers of his daughter. After having invoked the assistance of that august body, he set forth:—

'Not without tears, the cruel deed committed upon the twenty-ninth night of this past November in mine own house, which hath always been a sure refuge from all who dwell in this city, a deed committed by the most wicked Piero Bonaventuri, with the knowledge of Giambattista Bonaventuri, his uncle, a Florentine, and other accomplices unknown unto me. For having a house almost opposite unto mine own, wherein I do dwell over against Sant' Appollonia by the Ponte Storto (I possessing an only daughter some sixteen years of age), these wicked and perfidious men did by evil and detestable means enter mine house during the night and lead away my daughter unto their house, to the great offence and shame of my whole family. Wherefore never again shall I be happy in this world, and should utterly despair did I not trust that your Lordships would help me, and so make known my story that it will furnish an example unto the world and be a warning unto all strangers.'

The affectionate father then asks that his daughter may be restored to him, to be enclosed for the remainder of her life in a Venetian convent, and not allowed to roam at liberty with her seducer. In justification of his accusation against the two Bonaventuri, Bartolommeo presented such proofs of their guilt as he had been able to obtain in the short time and the confession supposed to have been dragged from Giambattista. But the former were considered doubtful and the latter more or less fabricated, for the poor uncle's complicity in the elopement was never clearly proved. The Council knew Bartolommeo, and they also knew the reputation of the honest Florentine! The

Patriarch Grimani, however, was not a person to be overlooked and the insistence of his complaints induced the Council of Ten to pass a decree that the matter should be attended to without delay. But there was business to settle more important than private love-affairs and several days passed without any steps being taken to punish the offenders. So Bartolommeo and Grimani, ignoring the fact that they had done nothing themselves to capture the fugitives, clamoured anew for what they called justice: and consequently Piero Bonaventuri was declared an outlaw on land and sea and sentenced to pay a fine of two thousand ducats, half to be paid to the treasury of the Ten and half to Bartolommeo Cappello, for having seduced his daughter away by representing himself to be a nephew of Piero Salviati and for assisting her to carry off jewels out of her father's house.

Meanwhile, Piero and Bianca had had ample time to reach Florence. For fear of the pursuit which never came they travelled with all the speed possible to Bianca, unfit and unprepared as she was to undertake a journey under conditions which presented unusual hardships, even considering the always rough and hazardous travelling of those times. It was winter, too, and winter winds blow bitter cold over those wide, unsheltered plains. They made only the briefest halts, the necessary rest for man and beast. Through Ferrara they passed, and Bologna, following the road as it wound over the lofty Apennines, by the banks of the rushing Reno, through forest and gorge and snow-drift, until, four days after their flight from Venice, in the fast fading light they climbed the last hill and looked down on Florence, where all their hopes of rest were placed.

The road from Bologna leads straight down to the Porta San Gallo, but when the young pair began to descend that last hill the short winter day was quickly closing in, and by the time they reached the city gate it was already shut for the night and they were stopped for the customary

Photo Brogi

BIANCA CAPPELLO IN EARLY YOUTH

From a portrait ascribed to Titian

inquiries made of all travellers before they were admitted within. But Piero was known to be a Florentine and therefore had no difficulty in gaining admission, and as he declared Bianca to be his wife she was also allowed to pass in without further question.

Thus it was, a frightened and weary fugitive, answering to a false description, that Bianca Cappello first set foot in the city where she was destined to play so prominent a part.

Once inside the gate, the pair immediately made their way to the house of Piero's parents, Ser Zanobi and Costanza Bonaventuri. They had not far to go, for Ser Zanobi rented a small house in the Piazza San Marco, on the side opposite the church and convent.[1] If the good people were delighted at seeing their son so unexpectedly, their joy was more than counterbalanced by their dismay when they beheld his companion and learnt the reason of her appearance at their house. Not for nothing were they dwellers in the turbulent city of Florence, and they knew how heavy a penalty is often exacted from those who venture to defy wealthy and powerful families, and how even the protection of princes may be too dearly bought; moreover, from whatever side it was viewed, Piero's offence was a very serious one. The flight of his son from Venice with this beautiful patrician and their action in seeking refuge at his house was likely to prove the greatest misfortune that had as yet befallen Ser Zanobi, and might bring ruin upon his entire family, as it had already ruined his brother. But for the moment there was nothing to be done save to care for a tired girl. So he bade the young Venetian consider herself at home, told her that henceforth he should look upon her as his daughter-in-law, and advised both her and his son to remain within doors for the present until they should hear what steps had been taken by Bianca's family.

Ser Zanobi was a prudent and practical man, who knew

[1] The house which now bears the number 6 and is occupied by a photographer. The prefix 'Ser' was a title borne by lawyers and notaries.

that even in the worst disasters prompt action and remedies are better than lamentation and weeping. According to the law in force at that particular time, the exchange of rings in the presence of witnesses, such as had taken place before Bianca's women in Venice, constituted a legal marriage, and therefore Piero and Bianca were already husband and wife weeks before they eloped from her father's house. But that law was shortly about to be altered, and in order to repair as far as possible the wrong committed by his son and to avoid any worse complications, Ser Zanobi insisted on the marriage ceremony being performed again with all due rites in his own presence. The contract was speedily drawn up by another notary, one Ser Antonio Rigogli, and witnessed by two friends of the Bonaventuri. After the civil marriage had been performed at the house the poor little wedding party, with as much secrecy as was possible and at an hour when few persons were about, crossed the square to the church of San Marco, where another trusted friend of the family, a Dominican friar, pronounced the nuptial blessing. This was on the 12th December 1563.

So they were married, and only just in time, for the sentence of the Council of Ten had already been made public in Venice on the 10th December, two days earlier, and Giambattista was arrested on the 15th.

When the news of the proceedings taken against them in Venice reached the young pair in Florence they were filled with terror, especially as they knew that Bianca's vindictive family would immediately despatch agents to Florence to carry out their threats. Piero being declared outlaw, there was no safety for him even outside Venetian territory and he might be assassinated anywhere; and though the sentence against her husband did not include Bianca, she ran an equal risk of being captured and taken back to her father and the convent by men who had secretly hurried to Florence in the hope of winning the reward. The rush of events in these last few days had left her no time for thought; loss of home and fortune, Piero's treachery, all

was submerged in the one pressing sense of the actual danger which threatened them both, for even in Ser Zanobi's house they could not be sure of safety.

But now the affair reached the ear of Duke Cosimo, and since the Council of Ten had taken official notice of it he could hardly ignore it. Cosimo was a ruler who, albeit a tyrant in his way, insisted on strict justice being administered in all ranks of his subjects, and this apparently small matter caused him considerable annoyance. He regretted that one of his subjects should have given just cause for offence to a friendly state and he deplored the sad fate of his good servant Giambattista. But Piero's father was his good servant too, and a worthy law-abiding citizen, and whilst he was hesitating what cause he should pursue in the matter there arrived a messenger from Bartolommeo Cappello, complaining, in the names of the whole family and of the Venetian people, of the injury received and demanding the death of the seducer and the restitution of the young lady.

Bartolommeo Cappello was no stranger to the Duke, for when Cosimo was taken as a child by his mother, Maria Salviati, to Venice to escape from the serious disturbances in Florence in 1527, they lodged for more than a year in Bartolommeo's house 'in the parish of Santa Maria Domini, on the Riva called the Pergola.' But now the fugitive child was Duke of Tuscany and the somewhat imperious demand for participation in his private affairs from one who was, after all, only a private gentleman, by no means pleased the haughty Cosimo. Nevertheless, he made inquiries and sent for the young culprits to appear before him and submit to a severe interrogation, first separately and then together.

By this time both Bianca and Piero fully realised the far-reaching consequences of their action, and their hearts sank at the unexpected summons; but it had to be obeyed, and, protected by Ser Zanobi and his friends, they made their way to the Palazzo Vecchio. And here the bride was further enlightened as to her bridegroom. For Piero, a coward at heart, fell trembling at the Duke's feet and implored forgive-

ness, alleging invincible love and young blood as an excuse for his fault and urging his marriage as reparation. But Bianca was made of stronger stuff; she stood up boldly beside her craven, grovelling husband, facing the Duke in her bright beauty, which was rendered all the more striking by the pallor of fatigue and anxiety. She admitted that love had led her into committing a fault, but she blamed her life at home, the father who had neglected her and the hated step-mother from whom she had never received anything but unkindness and ill-treatment. Surprised at her boldness, Cosimo threatened to shut her up for life in a convent and to send Piero to the prison he richly deserved. But while her terrified husband whimpered miserably at these words, Bianca bravely looked the Duke in the face and replied,—

'Your Illustrious Excellency must do as he pleases with us poor things; I am ready and willing to enter not only a convent but the hardest of prisons, there to end in wretchedness my unhappy life, if only my husband Piero may be the inseparable companion of my fate.'

Bianca's answer had its due effect, for Cosimo was a man who could appreciate bravery wherever he found it; moreover, her extraordinary beauty made such an impression on the always susceptible Duke that his anger at being forced to interfere in a private quarrel evaporated as he gazed at her. Perhaps he thought, as he looked from her to the despicable creature at her side, that she had her punishment already meted out to her, and more than she deserved. So he was merciful and dismissed the culprits kindly, but bade Bianca remain within doors for the present, since even his favour could not protect her from the secret vengeance of her angry family and a powerful Republic. Ser Zanobi was given the custody of his daughter-in-law and she was forbidden to leave the house on any consideration without his permission, and he and his friend Giuliano Salvetti were made security for her to the Council of Eight.

This was a heavy responsibility for the old notary, but at least it gave him command of the situation so far as his son

and daughter-in-law were concerned and he could take such measures as he deemed best for their safety. And so, thankful that they had all got off so lightly with the usually severe Cosimo, Ser Zanobi convoyed his troublesome children back to his house, there to await further developments.

Reviewed calmly, the situation in which Bianca now found herself was serious enough. She had listened to Piero believing him to be a Salviati and an equal, marriage with whom would sooner or later be inevitably followed by paternal forgiveness and a welcome home; and behold, her husband was only a wretched clerk, of obscure, though certainly respectable parentage. She had expected great wealth and a palace finer than her father's, and she found herself penniless in a little rented house, a burden on the slender income of her father-in-law, cast off by her own people, her own home closed to her for ever and her personal honour hopelessly compromised. And worst of all, she had bitterly to recognise that the man for whom she had spoilt her life was not worth what he had cost her. The scene before Cosimo had shown her what manner of creature Piero really was, a liar and adventurer and a coward into the bargain, and what love worthy the name could make such a discovery and suffer no abatement, especially a girl's first love, founded on idleness and romance?

But even at this early stage of her career Bianca was not one to waste time in vainly regretting her folly. Two things she already foresaw with absolute certainty; firstly, that such a life as she was now forced to live would speedily become intolerable, and secondly, that she must depend on herself alone if she were ever to escape from the trap into which she had fallen. For the present, however, there seemed nothing to be done. Their common danger, the Duke's express commands and her own physical condition, all condemned her to inaction and patience; but none the less her thoughts were busy, and fed the rage which consumed her as she pondered on her own credulity and Piero's

deceit. Love had failed her, but ambition, which survived as the master passion of her life, only gathered strength from its unexpected downfall. To what she exactly aspired, beyond freedom and the power of wealth, she hardly knew; for the moment her one aim was escape from her present thraldom and she immediately began to cast about for a means of achieving it.

Meanwhile, however, Bianca must needs lie hidden in the little house of the Bonaventuri, she who had fled from the spacious rooms and echoing corridors of the Palazzo Cappello as being too restricted for her energies. Instead of the gay company she had dreamed of meeting, her only companions were the man who was responsible for this calamitous state of affairs and his parents, whom the Duke had made her jailers and whom she must perforce obey; or such friends of Ser Zanobi's as he trusted sufficiently to admit to the house and see its new inmate, worthy citizens whom she welcomed for the news they brought but secretly despised as of lower rank and inferior clay. Instead of the attendants who had obeyed her sole bidding and waited on her hand and foot, there was here one little servant for the whole family, and Bianca must learn not only to wait on herself but even to help the old mother-in-law who, after all, was kind to her and on whom fell the burden of extra work entailed by the sudden additions to the family. Necessity and pride alike bade Bianca conform outwardly to the life of the household. But it was with angry heart and burning eyes that she sat stitching in the narrow room, or for sole distraction gazed, like an imprisoned bird, through the chinks of the shutters into the dusty square outside, as though hoping half unconsciously that some passer-by would pause at the door and bring help when least expected.

And that was just how help came.

The side of the square opposite the Bonaventuri's house was occupied by the Dominican church and convent of San Marco. In the north-eastern angle was the gateway leading to the Duke's stables, the long buildings of which formed

the side of the square facing the Via Larga.[1] The frequent journeyings of the Court and its followers and Cosimo's passion for hunting naturally necessitated the maintenance of a very large number of horses which, with the numerous coaches and chariots, were lodged in the Piazza San Marco, where there was ample room for exercise grounds and riding schools, such space being impossible nearer to the ducal residence in the Palazzo Vecchio. And hither every day came the Duke's eldest son, Don Francesco, then newly returned from Spain and soon to be formally recognised as Regent of Tuscany, reigning duke in all but name.

[1] Now Via Cavour.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRINCE

Cosimo I. Duke of Tuscany, son of the great soldier Giovanni delli Bande Nere and Maria Salviati, and head of the junior branch of the Medici family, was only eighteen years of age when in 1537 he succeeded to the throne after the murder of Duke Alessandro by his cousin Lorenzino, a deed which left no legitimate heir of the elder branch.

Although so young when he succeeded thus unexpectedly to the dukedom, Cosimo was no mere cipher in the hands of his advisers. He inherited the strong character of his father, whom he had lost whilst he was still a child, and his mother's training had in every way helped to develop it. If Cosimo's control over his subjects bordered in some ways on tyranny, it was a tyranny that was far more beneficial than harmful to the state. A suitable marriage was proposed for him with Isabella, eldest daughter of the Viceroy of Naples. But while he recognised the political value of the connection, the young Duke preferred to choose his wife for himself and he selected Eleonora, younger sister of the proposed bride. Eleonora was both handsome and virtuous, but she had been brought up according to Spanish ideas, and her cold, proud manner, together with her scornful indifference towards the Florentines, whom she distrusted, and her marked partiality for the Spaniards whom she brought with her from Naples and by whom she was always surrounded, caused her to be cordially disliked by her husband's subjects. Duchess Eleonora possessed a large private fortune, but nevertheless she followed Cosimo's example and owned ships for trading purposes, all for the

sake of making money, which, curiously enough, in spite of her natural avarice, she squandered freely in high play and wagers.

Princely and autocratic where the state was concerned, Cosimo's private life was simple and domestic. He was devoted to his wife, who had obtained a great ascendancy over him, and allowed her a voice in most matters of government, and so long as she lived he maintained when occasions required the splendid state due to his position and, outwardly at least, lived a decent and regular life.

Eleonora had nine children, the second child and eldest son, born in 1541, being the prince whose name was afterwards to become indissolubly linked with that of Bianca Cappello.

Little Don Francesco Maria took more after his mother than his father in appearance, with a dark, sallow complexion and narrow jaw, but he had regular features and large dark eyes and was supposed to have that penetrating gaze which was then considered a sign of exceptional intelligence and energy; intelligence he certainly did not lack, but his energy was not a quality which endured. Even as a child, however, he imitated the contemptuous manner of his mother and learnt to assume when in public the solemn airs of a grown man. As the Spanish fashion then prevailed in all things with the upper classes in Tuscany, this artificial manner was much admired, and when Francesco was only seven years old Cosimo sent him with an embassy to Genoa to welcome Prince Philip of Spain, and the Spanish court went into ecstasies over the child's precocious bearing.

None of the Medici ever neglected the education of their children. In addition to Spanish, which he prattled easily as his maternal tongue, Francesco learnt both French and German (attaining to great proficiency in the latter language after his marriage with Johanna of Austria), Latin and Greek, and, like his father, devoted much time to the study of the language and literature of his own country, although to the end of his life his own handwriting remained poor and his literary achievements were *nil*. Philosophy, mathe-

matics and astronomy were included in the prince's curriculum; but his real interests were scientific, especially the investigation of the origin and formation of stones and metals, trees and plants, and the study of animate bodies, dimly foreseeing the immense advantages science was to derive from the study of the different products of the earth and of the forces of nature. But investigations such as these were then in their infancy and it was not until several years later that there was born in Cosimo's own dominions the man who was to become the great pioneer of experimental science, namely Galileo Galilei, who first saw the light in Pisa in 1562. There is no doubt, however, that this childish hobby of Francesco's led to that occupation he found so absorbing all his life, namely, the preparation of remedies and potions of all descriptions and the distilling of poisons and their antidotes. He afterwards had a laboratory fitted up for his use and engaged skilled assistants, but he liked to work with his own hands and was always ready to give his remedies and medicines to any who might need them, rich or poor, stranger or Florentine. This laboratory was in the Palazzo Vecchio itself; but as the building was already too small to hold the Court and its attendants, and as, moreover, the noise and exhalations from the chemical experiments eventually became a nuisance, in 1568 Francesco acquired certain houses in the Via Larga and transformed them into studies and laboratories, erecting also the beautiful little building facing into the Piazza San Marco and known as the Casino de' Medici. And here it became his custom to spend most of his time. But this is anticipating.

Francesco also possessed a great taste for art, especially for the antique, and to him is due the first organisation of the Uffizi Gallery, intended primarily to hold the collection brought together by the Medici family, which was largely added to by Francesco himself. His artistic tastes were fostered by a young artist of his own age, Bernardo Buontalenti, who subsequently became one of the foremost architects and mechanicians of Italy. As a child Buontalenti

had lost his parents by the fall of their house in the Via de' Bardi, he alone being rescued alive from the ruins, and in pity Cosimo had taken the orphan into the palace and educated him with the ducal children, developing with true Medicean interest the exceptional talents which he possessed. And well did Buontalenti repay the protection accorded to him, for he expended his best efforts in the Duke's service and there was no work of art, no clever invention or new industry of which he was not the life and soul.

The end and aim of Cosimo's system of education for his eldest son was to fit him to become a wise and able ruler when he should be called to succeed him on the throne of Tuscany. Distrusting his strength of character, he sought to teach him independence and resolution, and he even allowed him to undertake certain duties, under capable watch and guidance, for the purpose of gaining practical experience. When he was nineteen Cosimo left him as his representative in Florence for two months whilst he and Eleonora were in Rome, but from his letters it would appear that the young prince did not allow his temporary responsibilities to interfere in the least with his usual occupations and favourite amusements. He had already been twice to Lucca, excursions that were events in those times of little travelling, and earlier in this year 1560 he had been sent to Ferrara to escort his sister Lucrezia when she went there as the bride of Duke Alfonso II., a marriage which it was hoped would put an end to the long-standing strife on the question of precedence between the houses of Medici and Este. But the little Duchess only lived fourteen months after her marriage and the rivalry broke out afresh with increased bitterness after her death.

Up to this time Don Francesco had contentedly led the life his father had marked out for him, absorbed in his studies and amusements like any other lad, and when he began to chafe at control and to engage in less innocent occupations it was through no fault of Cosimo's. The

journeys upon which his father had sent him, with the best educational intentions, and the greater liberty necessarily allowed him had somewhat turned his head. He began to resent the paternal authority, and as a way of emancipation he wanted to engage himself and his sword in the service of some foreign prince. Moreover, this youthful insubordination was not the only sign that his character was developing not altogether satisfactorily. He began to frequent society in the city which was unsuitable both to his age and rank, and to go about to suppers and entertainments alone or with only one or two companions, sometimes Buontalenti, but more often less safe escort. Cosimo was greatly disturbed by Francesco's new behaviour, which he considered unworthy of his position and dangerous to his safety, especially those nocturnal expeditions on which he was exposed to terrible risks. It was only in the previous year that Pandolfo Pucci's plot to assassinate Cosimo himself had been discovered, and the humour of the Florentines in general was far from reassuring.

In order, therefore, to put a stop to these bad practices and to separate him from undesirable companions, the Duke decided to send Francesco travelling again, first to Rome and then into Spain. So, accompanied by a splendid retinue, to Rome went the prince in the autumn of 1561, and by the Pope's orders he was received with the same ceremony as had been displayed for Cosimo and was given a lodging in the Vatican itself. And here, amongst the cardinals and nobles who paid state visits to the Duke's son, came Michelangelo Buonarroti, then eighty-six years old, to whom the artist soul of the Medici did instant homage. For when the old man entered the room Francesco rose and bared his head, placed him in his own seat and remained standing with the utmost respect whilst he talked. Pius IV. made much of Don Francesco during his short stay, and, as a parting gift, presented him with a granite column from the Baths of Caracalla, which cumbrous treasure was transported to Florence at Cosimo's expense and was nearly a

year on the way. That the youth managed to have a lively time in Rome is pretty certain, for he had hardly set out on the return journey when he complained of being ill. On arrival at Siena he was obliged to go to bed and send for the physicians, who candidly pronounced his disorder to be a feverish attack brought on by over-eating and a fondness for highly-spiced dishes, a weakness which unfortunately lasted to the end of his life, and with disastrous consequences.

The important visit to Spain was fixed for late spring. Francesco was intelligent, highly educated, and old enough to understand and take part in state questions, wherefore Cosimo hoped great things from this visit to Philip II., a monarch then held to be the very model of royal dignity, trusting that the mode of government as well as the strict manners and customs of the Spanish court would make a lasting impression on Francesco and induce him to behave more prudently for the future. This visit was also intended to pave the way towards obtaining a royal bride for the young prince, a thing ardently desired by Cosimo. And yet another, though secret, reason for it was that he might rival and outshine young Alessandro Farnese, the King's nephew, who was being educated at the Spanish court. With this youth Francesco was on such terms during his stay in Spain that more than once their hatred of each other broke through the mask of politeness it was necessary to wear, and only the intervention of others prevented an awkward outbreak of enmity.

The question of precedence between the various Italian princes, principally between the Medici, Este and Farnese, had begun with a rivalry between the Dukes of Tuscany and Ferrara so trifling that the animosity it aroused excited the amusement of all Italy, but through various events and causes it had increased to troublesome proportions. After the acquisition of the states of Siena Cosimo was looked on with envy by all the other princes, whose jealousy was inflamed by his friendship with the Pope and the King of

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Spain, for with these allies he became actually, if not nominally, the most powerful prince in Italy. And now his chief concern was to definitely establish his superiority and precedence by obtaining the title of Grand Duke from the Pope and by marrying his heir to a princess of royal blood.

Don Francesco was accordingly provided with a splendid court, chosen from amongst the first families of Italy, and which also included the chamberlain Mondragone and the young artist Bernardo Buontalenti. He was given magnificent clothes and jewels, an army of servants and thirty fine horses and an allowance ample for the upkeep of this immense retinue; and, after having entertained all those ladies of Florence to whom he owed hospitality at a great banquet in the Pitti Palace, he set out on the 9th of May for Pisa to bid farewell to his mother and brothers, Giovanni and Garzia, whom he was destined never to see again.

It happened that the autumn of 1562 was a season of great drought in Italy. There had been little or no rain for four months and the heat had been intense, so that men and beasts and vegetation alike suffered cruelly. On the 13th September the image of the Madonna della Quercia had been borne in procession through the streets of Florence as a means of intercession for the blessing of rain, and on the 16th came the longed-for downpour. But one night's rain was not enough to save the parched land and fill the empty wells in the city, and consequently an epidemic of fever broke out in northern and central Italy, raging most fiercely in the low-lying or marshy lands along the Ligurian coast. In the month of October Cosimo left Florence, accompanied by all his family, to visit various places for the sake of the hunting, always his favourite amusement, and to inspect certain improvements being carried out in the agricultural districts. About the middle of November his second son, the nineteen-year-old Cardinal Giovanni, was attacked by the fever at Leghorn and succumbed in a few days. As was the custom then, the body was embalmed a few hours after death, and it was then transported to

Florence, where it was buried with all due pomp in San Lorenzo. Only three weeks later, on the 3rd December, the third boy, Don Garzia, who was also ill but considered already out of danger, became worse and died at Pisa of the same malady as his brother. He was also immediately taken to Florence to be placed in the family vault, but he being still a minor, his interment was conducted with a simple service and without the ceremonies displayed for Giovanni. But these calamities were not all. Duchess Eleonora had long been suffering from a wasting complaint and lung trouble, and during Giovanni's short illness she had been at his bedside day and night, forgetting to eat or drink in her anxiety for her son. The fever was on her too, and when he died she simply collapsed with grief and illness. They dared not tell her of Garzia's death, but the mother's heart divined it and sank under the second blow, and on the 7th December the poor lady followed her young sons into the unknown land. The fourth boy, Ferdinando, was also attacked by the epidemic, but recovered. Thus in less than a month the Duke lost his wife and two children, and Giovanni had been the apple of his eye.

Too deeply stricken for words, Cosimo showed a fortitude and self-control which surprised every one, only his fearful pallor and unapproachable reserve witnessing to his inward grief. Contrary to the usual practice, the coffins of both the boys had been closed and the young bodies had not been exposed to the public gaze before burial, a highly necessary deviation from custom in the case of death from fever, especially where the bodies had had to be transported some distance. But this fact, in conjunction with the Duke's stern and despairing mien and the Duchess's unexpected death immediately after the funeral of Don Garzia, gave rise to the report which spread like wildfire through Italy and became the generally believed version of the tragedy. The two brothers, it was said, had quarrelled whilst out hunting and in a moment of passion the younger had struck and killed the elder. Terrified by his own deed,

the lad had fled to his mother, who kept him hidden for some time and then persuaded him to confess to his father and throw himself on his mercy. In the full belief that Cosimo would punish heavily but forgive, Eleonora herself led the weeping boy before him; but, declaring that he would have no fratricides in the family, the Duke drew his dagger and plunged it into Garzia's breast as he knelt before him. And it was said that Eleonora never recovered from the horror of that moment and died of the shock of that fearful sight.

The real truth of this domestic tragedy will now never be known, but will remain one of the dark pages in the history of that inscrutable family. Cosimo was already credited with more than one unpardonable deed. His eldest daughter, Maria, had died in 1557 and he was suspected of having had her poisoned as the surest way of stopping a love-affair with a young page; but this dire accusation has never been proved, nor has it ever been satisfactorily refuted. Modern history, grown incredulous of the abnormal and searching for new light on old facts, comes into constant collision with popular tradition, with versions of old stories sprung up at the time of enacting and on the very scenes and repeated verbally from generation to generation; and who can tell now where truth and tradition differ? In the case of the two boys Giovanni and Garzia, however, the simple version of natural deaths is most probably the true one. The epidemic which raged throughout northern Italy at that time attacked other members of the family, including the Duke of Ferrara; another victim was Federigo Borromeo (the Pope's nephew, who succumbed to it), as did large numbers of people in Venetia, Lombardy and Tuscany, seventy per cent. in Florence alone being affected, though the mortality was comparatively slight there. If, however, one brother was really killed by the other, either it was a grievous accident, in which case concealment was needless, or it was intentional, but committed under such circumstances that it would have been far easier

Photo Brogi

ELEONORA DI TOLEDO, DUCHESS OF TUSCANY
WITH DON GARZIA AS A CHILD
From the painting by Bronzino

to ascribe it to an accident of the chase than to an illness lasting several days. Moreover, in either case Cosimo would have confided the truth to Philip, who knew his most private affairs, but both in the letter sent by the Ambassador to inform the Spanish king and Francesco of the disaster and in the one written by Cosimo's own hand to his son, the details of the course of the maladies are too clear to admit of doubt.

This tragedy, however, was still in the future when Francesco embarked at Leghorn on the 23rd May 1562. The Florentine ambassador, a reliable and experienced man, was to be his chief guide and adviser in Spain, whilst his uncle, Don Garzia of Toledo, and the Duke of Alva were ready to do their best for him. The eldest son of a great Italian prince, of good appearance and in manners conforming to Spanish etiquette, magnificently equipped and accompanied by an imposing suite, dispensing gifts and hospitality in accordance with the traditions of his family, it was only natural that Francesco should immediately gain the favourable opinion not only of the grandees and ministers, but of the Queen herself and her ladies, and only the unhappy Don Carlos showed jealousy and hatred of the popular Prince of Tuscany.

Francesco did his best to carry out the negotiations entrusted to him by his father, which were chiefly to persuade Philip to settle once for all the vexed question of precedence between the courts of Florence, Ferrara and Parma, and to try and obtain for himself that wife of royal blood who was to confer fresh glory and importance on the dukedom of Florence and Siena. But King Philip carefully avoided giving a definite decision, as he wished to offend neither the Medici, the richest and most powerful ruler in Italy, nor the Farnese, to whom he was bound by ties both of kindred and of faithful service. So the vexed question remained undecided until the Pope settled it a few years later by himself conferring the title of Grand Duke on Cosimo.

Don Francesco remained in Spain sixteen months, enjoying and dispensing the most splendid hospitality and learning, amongst other things, to conceal an ill-regulated life under an impassive and scornful exterior. At least one thing of subsequent advantage to his subjects did result, however, from his Spanish experiences. The high-handed and unjustifiable punishment by the Inquisition of one of Francesco's gentlemen for a hasty oath spoken in the excitement of a game at ball, caused the Prince to conceive a hatred for the Holy Office even more virulent than that cherished by his father, and afterwards, during his own reign, he always opposed it as far as was possible considering the necessities of the times and his own intimate connection with the see of Rome.

Francesco was now recalled home. The loss of his wife and children and the extinction of the hopes he had placed in these two sons had effected a great change in Cosimo. The Pope, for his comfort, had conferred Giovanni's red hat upon the fourth son, Ferdinando; but it was poor consolation, and the very self-control he forced himself to exercise in continuing to direct his affairs as usual, the repression of his natural feelings, and perhaps also the terrible construction commonly placed upon the tragedy, had combined to weaken him and make him feel for the first time the need of some one to support and help him in the government of the state.

But it behoved Cosimo to open his purse-strings very wide before he got his eldest son home again. In regally upholding the traditions of his family for magnificence, Francesco had not only overstepped the ample allowance made him, but had further obtained large loans from bankers, especially from Tuscans established in Madrid. When he received his message of recall, Francesco, with a happy faith in his father's goodness, immediately sent his secretary back to Italy to lay the facts of the case before the Duke and represent the situation in the best light he could. Satisfied with the results of the Spanish visit, and above all

with the promise of the Archduchess Johanna of Austria, daughter of the Emperor Maximilian, as a bride for his son, Cosimo made no difficulty and granted the additional sum of 25,000 scudi to enable Francesco to leave Spain free from debt and to make the necessary parting gifts. But though the Duke readily forgave his son's extravagance, he did not let it pass without remark and wrote him a letter of friendly admonition and fatherly love, which for noble generosity and sage advice might stand as a model for all times:

'Profiting by the arrival of the ships and the return of Neri (the secretary), I write thee what is needful for the moment. And firstly with regard to sending the money,—orders have been given that thou shouldst be paid in Madrid the sum of twenty-five thousand scudi, which, with thy income, should amply suffice for thy present needs. But I do tell thee particularly that because of the extraordinary sum which the Abbondanza[1] hath lost this year and the alms which are given every day, which do always exceed twenty-two thousand and often twenty-three thousand scudi, there will be very great expenses this year; we cannot forget the poor, for if we forget them God will forget us. Therefore, to content thee and that thou mayest make as honourable an appearance at thy departure as at thine arrival, I have provided thee with this sum. But remember further that I have lent unto the King of France eighty thousand scudi, and that the calamities which have befallen us have put me to so many additional expenses that I cannot possibly say yet what the amount hath been. Yet one must satisfy both God and the world in such cases. Wherefore, believe me, I have done more than mine utmost in this matter. It doth not grieve me to spend, provided one spendeth honourably; but do thou only remember that when a man hath nothing of his own it is evil for him if he giveth with the help of others. I do not say this for the

[1] The Office of the Abbondanza, or Grascia, controlled the market prices of provisions and also supervised weights and measures. The failure of the crops this year had forced it to sell corn to the people at a loss.

present moment alone, but because the security of states lieth not in irritating the people. If God permitteth thee to return in good health thou must see and hear all these things from me, because thou wilt not hear them from others. For each one seeketh to get what he can, and in times when there is no money one findeth but little love. And, believe me, I have found myself in this pass many times. Enough that the true way is to live honourably, and to strive to earn one's own money by one's own efforts without being forced to seek the help of others. This is the true way to preserve estates and reputation and friends. All others are vanity.'

Thus Francesco's affairs in Spain were settled satisfactorily and he was able to depart as magnificently as he had arrived. On the 18th September 1563 he landed at Bocca d'Arno, near Pisa, and immediately made his way to the ducal villa of Poggio a Cajano, some miles from Florence, where Cosimo lay ill in bed awaiting him.

CHAPTER V

THE LORD PROTECTOR

TWENTY-EIGHT years of rule, often fraught with great difficulties and dangers and during which he had at no time spared his personal labour or shirked his duty to the state, combined with the exertions endured in the hunting expeditions and other violent physical exercises in which it was his pleasure constantly to indulge, had gradually sapped Cosimo's strength and weakened his energy. The overwhelming domestic sorrow which fell upon him so suddenly, and which he bore with such apparent stoicism, had struck him deeper than any one guessed and had caused him to resolve on taking an important step which had much to do with recalling Francesco from Spain.

This important step, which caused general astonishment throughout Italy, was nothing less than that Cosimo himself should abdicate (with certain reservations) and leave the government in the hands of his eldest son. Additional reasons for this step were, firstly, that in view of his contemplated marriage with the Archduchess Johanna it was desirable that Francesco should be invested with greater dignity and importance; and, secondly, that in this way the legitimate heir took undisputed possession of his throne, a by no means invariable event then in Italy, where illegitimacy was no bar to succession and the lawful heir sometimes never came into his inheritance at all. Cosimo considered, moreover, that his subjects would not be displeased to see their new ruler beginning his reign with the safeguard and benefit of his father's experienced guidance. Francesco was to have the entire government and administration of the

state, but Cosimo retained the title of Duke and reserved to himself the right to direct and advise on all important matters, and the supreme authority throughout all his dominions. He retained a sufficient portion of the revenues to enable him to live suitably and comfortably in the semi-private life he designed for himself, while the remainder was made over to Francesco for the adequate support of his new dignity. Cosimo further retained in his own hands the election of the chief officers of the army and navy and of the governor of Siena, and also the revenues of this tributary state, his interest in the mineral works, the marble quarries and silver mines, the use of all the ducal palaces and villas and the possession of some valuable furniture and other treasures. Francesco was empowered to govern as he pleased within these limits, to make new laws and elect new ministers, but he was forbidden to sell or mortgage any state castle or lands, or any customs office in the dominion, and he had to continue at his own expense the building of the Pitti Palace and to pay a considerable yearly sum to his brother Ferdinando. Cosimo was much pleased with himself over this plan of abdication, which so flatly contradicted the grasping and ambitious character generally imputed to him and placed him in a good light with both the Pope and King Philip, to the former of whom he gave as his reason for his action that he desired peace and leisure wherein the better to serve God, while to the latter he asserted that in this matter also he wished to imitate the example set by the Emperor Charles V.

But at the time of Bianca's arrival in Florence Francesco was only acting as his father's deputy in certain details of city government, one of which was the control of the police. Thus in the ordinary course of his duties her romantic escapade and the Venetian complaints were reported to him, and in his official capacity he was forced to take note of her case.

Bianca's story and the fame of her beauty had spread through Florence, the former doubtless with many embroid-

eries, the latter reported all the more marvellous because so few persons had seen her. Young Francesco, just returned from Spain, naturally susceptible to female beauty and only too ready to be interested in the fair sex, was not likely to have disregarded the reports current in the city. How and where he first saw her it is now impossible to say with certainty. There are no official records of those early days; Bianca was in disgrace with the Venetian Republic, and though her name passed freely from tongue to tongue it never figured in the city archives, nor was a true version of the episode ever afterwards drawn up; Florence desired to save the honour of her prince, Venice spared a daughter of the Republic, and the living witnesses of her adventures were either too faithful and discreet, or else had their mouths effectually stopped. But tradition, often truer than history, and the tale-writers of her own time have supplied the missing links in the chain of Bianca's story.

The forlorn bride had not spent many days in her father-in-law's house, obtaining her only glimpses of the outside world through the narrow slats of the safely closed shutters, before she marked and learned to watch for the princely figure who came every morning to inspect the stables and who rode, a gallant horseman, through the square of San Marco on his return to the Palace. For his nearest way lay past the Bonaventuri house, and as day by day he rode into her actual line of vision, so he rode insensibly into those vague plans and desires which yet had no definite aim. To the Venetian, horses and riders were sufficiently of a novelty to arrest her attention; a handsome youth in rich attire, and a prince to boot, was more than a casual attraction to a girl who had but exchanged one prison for another, even though disillusionment was bitterly fresh in her mind. And bitter, too, was the half-unconscious comparison between fact and fancy. Such was the husband of whom she had dreamed, a brave rider in the light of day, not the craven clerk hiding from justice. And into the racked brain came a daring idea; the rider suddenly came to represent more

than an object of idle curiosity, and Francesco immediately became the centre-point of Bianca's scheming. Here, could she but reach it, was the help she sought, the one person powerful enough to protect and young enough to sympathise with youth. But how to obtain that help, how even to make sure that it would be granted were she to implore it, was a problem she knew not how to solve. Fear kept her a close prisoner behind those closed shutters, and she knew well what the consequences might be if she disobeyed the Duke's commands and showed herself in the public street. But chance opened the way she could not find for herself. One day an accident, a sudden uproar in the square, drew her to the window and momentarily absorbed her attention. Forgetting caution, she opened the shutter and leaned forward in order to see what was happening, and then, raising her eyes, she found herself confronting those of Don Francesco, who had reined in his horse in front of the window and was gazing at her with frank admiration. An instant only, but the mischief was done: he lifted his cap and Bianca hastily closed the shutter, frightened in spite of her secret schemes, and fled to tell her mother-in-law of what had happened. But as days passed and no reprimand came for her indiscretion, Costanza only bade her be more careful in future, secretly pitying her daughter-in-law and doing her best to lighten her captivity.

Meanwhile the incident was far from being forgotten by Francesco. The fleeting glimpse had been sufficient to set him all aflame, and when he learnt from his attendants that the unknown beauty was the very Venetian runaway of whom he had lately heard wonders, his curiosity was roused to such an extent that to see her again became his chief preoccupation. But in vain he rode each day through the square; in vain he attended mass at all the churches in the neighbourhood, one after the other, in the hope that Bianca might be amongst the worshippers; she was far too careful to risk being caught again, until, at least, she was sure of her ground. But what hopes surged up within her whenever

she thought of the Prince's face! She had wondered if she could appeal to him for help, wondered if it would be granted if she ever did succeed in reaching his ear, and now, in spite of her inexperience, she knew instinctively that her cause would be easy to win.

Impatient of any delay in his amusements, Francesco soon tired of hunting his latest fancy in the churches and bade his most familiar spirit find a way to lure the quarry into the open. Amongst the retinue in attendance on Francesco's mother, Eleonora of Toledo, had been a certain plausible Spaniard, by name the Marquis di Mondragone. This clever gentleman had so well understood how to work his way into the Duchess's good graces that she presently came to rely on him implicitly, and when Francesco became of an age to have his own separate attendants, Eleonora, who had no faith in any but her own countrymen, appointed Mondragone to be the young Prince's chamberlain and his general guide, philosopher and friend in morals as well as social matters. But Mondragone was a double-faced time-server; this was the position he had aimed at all along, foreseeing that Francesco would be easier to manage and make profit out of than was Cosimo. He was supposed to exercise a wholesome restraint upon the Prince when his amorous propensities or his love of adventure threatened to lead him into difficulties, and the Duke believed in his good influence; but as a matter of fact it was Mondragone who was Francesco's right hand in all his less creditable adventures, encouraging him in those pleasures which Cosimo detested for his son and helping him to procure whatever he desired. And now Mondragone was bidden to find a way of reaching Bianca without alarming her.

Amongst courteous ladies acquaintances are easily made, even if they do not happen to have been upon visiting terms with each other previously, or even moving in the same social circles. It suffices that the more exalted of the two should have decided intentions in the matter. Not long after the exciting incident in the square of San Marco it

chanced that Donna Costanza Bonaventuri made the acquaintance of the Marchioness di Mondragone, and was surprised and touched by the sympathetic kindness of the charming Spaniard. The situation had begun to weigh rather heavily on the old lady: Ser Zanobi was taciturn and strict, Piero was unsatisfactory, and really she was sorry for Bianca: a little opportune sympathy loosened her tongue; the Marchioness Mondragone was so highly placed that she could give the best possible advice how to obtain the Duke's favour and permission to emerge from the irksome seclusion to which the young people were condemned. The Marchioness was only too happy to assist, but suggested that as her husband knew so much more about these things than she did, his advice would be more valuable than hers, and as he would certainly be able to point to a way out of the difficulties the ladies must come to her house and consult him. Flattered, but yet afraid, Donna Costanza hesitated for fear of Ser Zanobi's displeasure, further restrained, moreover, by the thought that neither she nor Bianca possessed raiment fine enough for a visit to the Mondragones. But the kind Marchioness speedily overcame all her objections, and thus it happened that one morning a carriage drew up before the Bonaventuri's door and a servant alighted bearing two beautiful dresses lent by the Marchioness, in which Bianca and her mother-in-law attired themselves, and then, entering the carriage in fear and trembling, they were driven rapidly through the streets to the Palazzo Mondragone.

The Spaniards occupied a large house near the church of Santa Maria Maggiore,[1] and had prepared a reception for the Bonaventuri ladies which immediately put Donna Costanza at her ease and made Bianca feel that she was once more amongst her equals. The day was hot, the garden secluded and shady, and here the visitors were invited to rest and partake of the sweets and pastries and cooling drinks set out

[1] The house stood at the corner formed by the Via de' Panzani and the Via de' Banchi. The site is now completely built over.

under the trees. Poor Donna Costanza was enchanted to feast on delicacies she had not been obliged to prepare herself, and when the Marchioness proposed to show Bianca over the house, the old lady was only too pleased to stay where she was and discuss her family troubles with the Marquis.

So the Marchioness led Bianca through the house and displayed her treasures for the visitor's amusement. Florentine houses differed in many respects from the Venetian; there was much to distract the stranger's attention and throw her off her guard. In one small room on an upper floor was the cabinet where the Marchioness kept her jewels, and with a sure knowledge of innocent youthful vanity she hung the finest of her ornaments on her lovely guest and bade her admire her own reflection in the glass. 'And I have Venetian dresses too,' cried the Marchioness, 'though I know not if they be of the right fashion; but you are a Venetian and shall tell me that!' And she hurried from the room to fetch them.

All unsuspecting, Bianca continued her amusement until a step in the corridor, which was certainly not that of the Marchioness, made her drop the jewels and suddenly realise with terror that she was alone in a strange house and that her father's emissaries might have taken her at last. Like a flash she perceived Donna Costanza's credulity and her own indiscretion, and though the instant she saw the newcomer she knew she had nothing to fear in that direction, her dismay was none the less great. She knew him again directly, the dark young man in the rich dress, who carefully closed the door and stood before her with the most ardent admiration written on every line of his countenance. So that was the trap into which she had fallen—the Prince, not the prison! And she was alone with him in an upper room in a strange house. Bianca was still honest and the traditions of all her life rushed into her mind. 'O my Prince,' she cried, 'save my honour!' and she fell on her knees at his feet.

But he ran forward and raised her and swore that her honour was safe as her life with him. He only wanted to help her, he said, and then he told her how he had heard of her adventure and had seen her in the square (as though she did not know !), and he soothed and calmed her till she let him kiss her hand and promised him her full confidence. Francesco was enraptured; never had he known so easy or so charming a conquest, never surely did prince fall so completely into the trap he had laid for another. But for both their sakes this first interview must not be prolonged; the Marchioness was keeping watch on the stairs and had bidden the Prince not linger. Bianca smiled, and her shrewd eyes read him through and through as he turned and let his ardent eyes rest upon her once again ere he left the room. Her hopes had been realised beyond her utmost expectations; the protection she wanted was hers. But in that first moment all the possibilities of that protection did not present themselves to her mind. In truth, she did not know her own power, and as yet she held Piero's welfare inseparable from her own.

An instant later the Marchioness came back, full of concern for the fright her guest must have suffered, eloquent in her praise of the Prince and her assurances that in this matter he was to be trusted to keep his promises. Francesco possessed a private key to the Palazzo Mondragone and entered unannounced at all hours, the visit was wholly unexpected and the Marchioness full of regret for leaving Bianca alone. Bianca listened and accepted the excuses, and saw through the Spaniard's lies and rejoiced; since the Prince could stoop to plan a meeting she was even safer than she had thought.

Even princes are not omnipotent, however, and Francesco could not control the laws of two states. Having once taken up Bianca's cause, he did his best for her with all the ardour which such men as he throw into the pursuit of a new love-affair, however transient it may promise to be, and he made the most of what power he possessed. Through the

Florentine resident in Venice, Messer Cosimo Bartoli, he endeavoured to obtain from the Council of Ten forgiveness for the young couple and orders for the payment of the fortune which Bianca had inherited from her mother. He even enlisted the Papal Nuncio in the matter, but all in vain. The decree against Piero was confirmed, and also the order to pay a fine of two thousand ducats, one thousand to the Council of Ten and one thousand to Bartolommeo Cappello, as a warning to all strangers who might in future seek to corrupt the maidens of Venice. Bianca was not included in the sentence of banishment and confiscation issued against her husband, but the six thousand ducats due to her as a marriage portion under her mother's will was absolutely refused her by her father and she never succeeded in recovering the sum which was rightly her own.

Meanwhile, the man who had suffered most in all this affair, the innocent victim of his own generosity, poor Giambattista Bonaventuri, was lying in close confinement in a Venetian prison. Already on 22nd December Messer Bartoli had reported that he was likely to remain a prisoner without help or hope unless Bianca were restored to her family and placed in a convent. Good security had been offered for him by his friends, but the Venetian Senate was inexorable, and the cautious Bartoli added that he had refrained from interfering in any way until he knew the Duke's orders. The resident was now bidden to do all he could to assist the unfortunate Florentine, but he was directed to act in such a manner that his interest should seem personal rather than official and he was not to let it appear that the Duke was moving in so trivial a matter. For though, influenced by the position and the rancour of those immediately concerned, and especially by the Patriarch Grimani, whose wrath and indignation were great, the Council of Ten had been obliged to show itself severe, there were many in Venice who laughed and declared that far too much importance had been given to a purely

private love-affair. Under these circumstances interference was not easy.

At Giambattista's request, however, Bartoli and the Bishop of Fano, together with the Papal Nuncio, who were all friends of the prisoner, interceded for him with the Patriarch Grimani, pointing out how the unhappy man had unwittingly inculpated himself by his too great frankness with his accusers, and that this very frankness proved his innocence of any complicity, or even knowledge of Piero's offence, while the fact that he had completely ruined himself in his efforts to undo as far as possible the evil his nephew had committed and save Bianca's honour, was clear proof of his integrity. The persuasions of his brother ecclesiastics had some effect; the Patriarch showed signs of relenting, and Giambattista's lot was improved in so far as he was no longer confined to one room, but was allowed to go into any part of the building he chose. All further efforts to obtain his freedom were useless, however, for the greatest freedom of all was presently his; the poor bank-manager had contracted smallpox in the pestilential prison where he had first been confined—the commonest fate of prisoners at that time—and in spite of the comparative liberty subsequently granted him and the care of the doctors, he died of it on the 24th of February, a victim to his nephew's thoughtlessness and the vindictive pride of the Venetian nobles. The poor old steward Giovanni Donati de' Longhi also died in prison a few months later, and as no confession had been extracted from the women, even under torture, they were eventually set at liberty.

CHAPTER VI

THE ARCHDUCHESS

Cosimo had judged his eldest son's character fairly accurately, and not without reason had he distrusted the too great freedom of his habits and his choice of associates and deemed an idle life to be the worst possible thing for him. Not that Francesco was by any means a second Alessandro de' Medici; far from it. Up to now his adventures had been mostly of the nature of youthful follies, often known only to his intimate friends, and he always knew how to maintain a certain reserve and dignity even in the lowest of his intrigues; his Spanish blood counted for something even here. Moreover, in Florence at that time, and especially amongst the nobles, morality was not of a high standard. Manners were exquisite, courtesy in all dealings was the rule, but pleasure and the gratification of the senses was, generally speaking, the end and aim of life, and men let little in the way of thought for the honour or welfare of those beneath them stand in the way of their own amusements. In such a society, too, there was no lack of ladies ready to accord their favours to a prince and hold themselves fortunate in being the object of his transient attentions. One of these temporary connections was with the notorious Cassandra de' Ricci, who brought so many men to grief and was destined afterwards to play an important part in the development of Bianca's career. Pleasure was the real object of the frequent journeys Francesco undertook, ostensibly on state business, but until he met the beautiful wife of Piero Bonaventuri he had found no woman capable of permanently enslaving him.

In spite of all revelations as to his true character and position, Bianca certainly still loved her husband. He was her first love, on whom she had lavished the ardours of her young romance and passion. But passion had died a sudden death and what she now felt for him was rather the half-contemptuous love of the stronger for the weaker, to whom she was bound by ties of common interests and common danger, a love which must inevitably grow impatient of its own folly and gradually succumb to discontent and the promptings of ambition. The change in her character is easy to understand if one considers the events which turned her in so short a time from an impulsive girl into a clear-sighted and calculating woman. Great events, whether of joy or sorrow, seldom leave the strongest character unchanged, and few there are who possess sufficient strength of mind and nobility of nature not to deteriorate in some measure under disappointment. The more complicated the difficulties, the more complicated of necessity are the means which must be adopted to extricate oneself from those difficulties, and he who sees in strategy and deception, even of the most innocent kind, his only means of escape, embarks involuntarily upon a perilous course of action from which it is afterwards almost impossible to deviate.

Although there was no want in the Bonaventuri household, there was assuredly no luxury, and now that the family had settled down into some sort of routine, Bianca found a great difference between her present and her former surroundings. Life was not gay in the small and simple house in the Piazza San Marco, and the suspense as to the issue of Bartolommeo's suit and, above all, anxiety on account of poor Giambattista, cast a cloud of depression over the whole family. Piero, too, had grown accustomed to an easy and luxurious life in the house of his too lenient uncle and found a return to the necessarily more careful ways of his parents by no means to his taste. It was irksome, too, to feel that they held him responsible for the misfortune which had befallen them. At first he hoped for pardon from

Venice and the possession of Bianca's dowry, which had been his chief temptation when first he embarked on the mad scheme of winning her. But when these hopes failed, when a reward was offered for his capture, when his uncle died miserably in prison—arousing, it is to be hoped, some shadow of sorrow and remorse in his nephew's selfish heart—Piero began to realise that his well-arranged plan for his own aggrandisement had not been precisely successful and that he must now bestir himself and find some way of bettering his condition. He could not look to his father for help, for, as it was, Ser Zanobi could barely support his numerous family, and the death of his brother was a bitter blow not easily forgiven even to his own son. Moreover, Piero began to feel bored; his first hot passion for Bianca cooled, he found a penniless patrician wife less of a treasure than he had expected, and very soon his natural selfishness and love of pleasure asserted itself again. He dared not venture out of doors at night for fear of the Venetian bravos hired by his father-in-law to murder him and capture Bianca, but he began to go out again during the daytime in search of some post or other which would bring money to his purse, and also in search of the pleasure he could not do without. He found acquaintances amongst the idle youths of the city and even was imprudent enough to take some of his new friends home to see his wife. So the tales and gossip spread more and more.

In spite of his exalted rank, his official authority in municipal matters rendered it easy for Francesco to create opportunities for improving his acquaintance with a lady who caused so many tongues to wag, and his reputation as a pursuer of the fair sex explained his zeal, if explanation were needed. Under pretext of interrogating her on the subject of her father's suit, he could command her presence in the house of the Mondragones or any other convenient place, where tender manner and daring gaze lent a character quite other than official to the inquiry.

But, contrary to his experiences hitherto, when he came

to know her better his admiration quickly deepened into the strongest passion of which his nature was capable. And Bianca, on her side, was flattered by the Prince's admiration. She had no distractions in the dull little house, and she soon discovered that it was not the search for fortune alone which took Piero out every day, that hers was no longer the only face in the world for him. And half in revenge, half with the hope of keeping her husband at her side through jealousy, she began to treat Francesco as something more than merely a patron and protector, to listen without protest if the tone of his voice and the words that he spoke were incompatible with princely or official prudence. Nevertheless Francesco had considerable difficulty in winning something warmer than grateful deference from the young Venetian, brought up as she had been in the strict traditions of her native city and rank, exposed now to the good influence of the old couple with whom she lived, and soon to be the mother of Piero's child. But all opposition merely inflamed the Prince's ardour: he could ill brook opposition and was only biding his time.

Piero speedily remarked the attraction his wife had for Francesco, but the discovery filled him with quite other feelings than those Bianca had reckoned on. She had already found him to be base and weak, but to what extent she had yet to learn. He only saw in the threatened connection a splendid chance for him to repair his fortunes, perhaps even the hope of a better future than that for which he had schemed and ruined both himself and his uncle in Venice, and immediately his wife acquired a far greater value in his eyes than she had ever possessed before. Every Florentine knew what was Francesco's reputation where women were concerned, and if Piero did not at this early stage of the affair actually tell himself that the clever husband of a prince's favourite has practically the ball of fortune at his feet, he certainly hoped to attain to a comfortable position through his wife's influence.

The order for Bianca's strict seclusion to the house had

been very soon rescinded through Francesco's intervention, but her comings and goings were still subject to her father-in-law's authority and she could not appear in the street without his permission and the escort of either himself or of some one appointed by him. But Ser Zanobi, good man soon began to find the custody of the young Venetian to be an intolerable burden. He had received her with kindness and loyally done his best for her as his son's wife and one who had been wronged by him, but before she had been many weeks an inmate of his house, his sharp old eyes had perceived the way to which she inclined and fear and disapproval had filled his honest soul. He himself had been made legal security for her by the Duke and did his best to fulfil the trust imposed upon him, but Piero, the very one whose interests he sought to safeguard, was the one to render his precautions futile. Ser Zanobi's admonitions availed little against the freedom Bianca's husband would allow her, and all his remonstrances to his son were met with laughter and the assurance that the daughter of a Venetian noble could safely be trusted. But Piero was not Ser Zanobi's only child, there were others to be considered; so with a wholesome fear of the ways of princes and with the warning of Giambattista's fate before his eyes, the cautious notary took measures to place himself beyond the reach of the law by refusing all further responsibility for the actions of the young couple, and on the 7th July 1564 he formally petitioned to be relieved of the custody and supervision of his daughter-in-law.

Ser Zanobi's dissociation with his son and his wife was, however, only nominal and not actual, for they continued to live at his expense and to reside under his roof. And here, in the house of her grandfather, on the 23rd July 1564, was born Pellegrina Bonaventuri, Bianca's first and only child. The old people rejoiced greatly at the event, doubtless hoping that the joys and cares of motherhood would now keep Bianca from other and dangerous interests; and the mere fact that the baptism took place

publicly and that the infant's sponsors were such prominent Florentine citizens as Cammillo Strozzi and Giovanni Battista Gondi, proves that Francesco's patronage had already produced a great effect on the position of the family.

Meanwhile Bianca quietly pursued her life in Florence, unobtrusively strengthening her hold on the Prince and secretly adapting her ambitious plans to the widening prospect of fulfilment which Francesco's infatuation seemed to open before her. The instinct of self-preservation had worked further great changes in her character, and her first insight into the possibilities of a position as recognised favourite of a reigning prince had spurred her ambition while it stifled her conscience. The relation in which husband and wife now stood towards each other may be imagined. Their love, built on such fragile foundations, had not stood the strain of disillusion and domestic discomfort. The ruling passions, craving for freedom and power in her, greed of gold and self-indulgence in him, which had first attracted them to each other and lighted the quickly spent flame, could not resist the temptation presented by the coming of Francesco; that which had once drawn them together now kept them apart, though with a tacit, guilty understanding that the secret plans of each would best be furthered by non-interference with those of the other. It was less than a year since they had first met and Bianca had seen in the supposed Salviati the one who was to open for her the door of life, and in that short time the life he had shown her had sufficed to make her what she now was, almost a mate for Piero Bonaventuri himself.

Bianca's friendship with the Prince, at first kept strictly within the bounds of propriety and taken but little notice of, presently became a matter for gossip and naturally reached the ears of the Duke. Cosimo, who, since he had deputed most of his official duties to his son, had lived chiefly in Pisa, was well aware of the steps Francesco had taken with regard to Bianca's affairs in Venice. But at that time he was obliged to be very careful in his relations with

his son and to call him to order upon a question of morals would have been a delicate matter, Cosimo's own doings in that respect having already roused comment in the city. After the death of the Duchess Eleonora he had made a favourite of a Florentine girl of good family, Eleonora degli Albizzi (with the consent of her father, be it said), and she had already borne him a daughter who, however, died an infant. Francesco might very well respond with a *tu quoque*, and moreover Cosimo was anxious to keep on good terms with him and not to risk having any sort of unpleasantness until his projected marriage was an accomplished fact.

After considering other matches, Cosimo had as long ago as the spring of 1562 decided on the Archduchess Johanna of Austria as being the most suitable bride for his son, and the negotiations between him and the Emperor Ferdinand, often begun and dropped again, seemed likely to be satisfactorily concluded at last. Cosimo greatly desired this marriage; it would be advantageous to him in his dealings with Spain and would insure Austria being on his side in his struggle for the supremacy over the other Italian princes of Parma, Urbino and Mantua, and, above all, those of Ferrara and Savoy, who looked with envy and displeasure at the renewed splendour and influence of the Medici, whom they despised as being sprung from bankers and merchants and hated because of the protection accorded them by the Pope and Philip II. of Spain. Francesco shared his father's opinion as to the advantages to be derived from this match, and though personally he had no desire to be married at present, state reasons bade him take every precaution not to throw difficulties in the way of the negotiations which might further delay, or even render them futile His connection with Bianca Bonaventuri was, therefore, kept as secret as possible and outwardly he assisted his father and acted with him in perfect accord.

Cosimo now carried out his intention of formally abdicating in favour of his son. On the 11th June 1564, his own birthday, the two procurators sent by the Duke, who was

at Pisa, proclaimed Don Francesco ruler of the states of Florence and Siena, with certain reservations, as already described. These procurators, who were Bartolommeo Concini, the Duke's secretary, and Francesco Vinta, held a great meeting in the Palazzo Vecchio, when all the Magnificent Counsellors and the Forty-Eight Signori assembled to kiss Francesco's hand and swear allegiance to him, this ceremony being followed by a solemn mass in the Duomo, serving the double purpose of celebrating Cosimo's birthday and Francesco's accession to power, and a splendid banquet at the Palace to which all the members of the government were invited.

Cosimo hoped that the new importance conferred on his son would have a favourable influence on the marriage negotiations, but suddenly these were again interrupted by the death of the Emperor Ferdinand. Perforce the Duke had to submit to delay, though he urged that something definite should be settled. But the new emperor, Maximilian II., was in no hurry, and his somewhat grudging consent to the betrothal of the Archduchess Johanna and Don Francesco was not announced to the Duke's ambassador till early in the year 1565, and then with the condition that the marriage should not take place before the year of mourning for Ferdinand had elapsed. The contract was immediately drawn up and signed, and then Cosimo felt more satisfied, while to two persons, at least, the extra year of freedom for Francesco was welcome.

The prospective bridegroom made the most of his last months of bachelorhood. He had no notion of letting his engagement curtail his pleasures, but he had the sense to avoid needless publicity and to pay his more unauthorised visits, notably those to Bianca, after dark. This proceeding was dangerous enough and caused Cosimo renewed anxiety, both on account of the danger his son ran from assassins and the scandal likely to be aroused. He remonstrated frequently and urgently, for great issues hung upon Francesco's behaviour just now.

Photo Brogi

FRANCESCO DE' MEDICI AS A YOUNG MAN

From a portrait by Bronzino

'Your going out alone through Florence by night,' he wrote, 'is not well, and is neither profitable, honourable nor safe, more especially when it becometh habit and custom, and it would not be possible to tell of all the evil which might result from such doings. From me ye have but little interference, but in matters so serious ye must hearken to mine opinion, and I do know you to be sufficiently prudent to remedy that which could injure us.'

In spite of the seclusion in which she dwelt, Bianca was already a factor to be reckoned with.

But Francesco was prudent, and moreover there were other attractions in the city, and he was energetic in organising amusements with the young nobles who were his companions. In the spring of 1565, when preparations were already afoot for his bride's reception, he planned a series of entertainments for Carnival which were to afford him a last unrestrained season of amusement and the opportunity for further conquests amongst the ladies. Knowing, however, that from his semi-retirement his father kept a strict watch on all his doings, Francesco conceived the brilliant idea of inviting the Duke of Florence to join in the fun, promising him at least two masked beauties with whom to divert himself. And Cosimo, who, in spite of his forty-five years, his gout and other increasing infirmities, could not resist such an offer, accepted the invitation, on condition, however, that he came incognito, that he should wear his mask all day and that none should know of his presence in the city. But Francesco would know, and though on pleasure bent, the father's company might perchance act as a brake in the mad course of folly he foresaw was intended.

Bianca, too, found the postponement of the wedding welcome. She had now deliberately chosen the path she meant to pursue and which seemed to lead to all she desired, and she had no intention of letting her protector's marriage interfere with her plans for her own advantage. But she needed time to look about her and marshal her

resources, for the imperial wife might prove a dangerous rival. She was now free to go about as she liked and she must learn to know the city and the Florentines, and, above all, the ducal court and those in touch with it; for that was the particular stage whereon in time, by what means she knew not yet, nor in what particular character save that it must be a leading one, Bianca Bonaventuri had determined to play her part.

CHAPTER VII

A WEDDING IN FLORENCE

ALTHOUGH he had so much desired it, the Austrian marriage was not pleasing in quite all respects to Cosimo. The Emperor's sisters were reported to be far from pretty and he knew that Francesco was critical on this point; moreover, one of them, Barbara, was betrothed to his rival, Alfonso II., Duke of Ferrara, and the marriage was to take place at the same time as that of Francesco and Johanna. These, however, were minor drawbacks to what was otherwise a most advantageous match.

The four daughters of the Emperor Ferdinand, by virtue of his second title of King of Hungary, bore the title of queens and had the right to wear a royal crown; this is the reason why Johanna was always spoken of by the Florentines as 'Queen Giovanna.' Born in 1547, the Archduchess Johanna (or Giovanna, to give her at once the prettier name by which she was generally known after her marriage) was the best-looking of all the sisters, though certainly even she was no beauty. Her chief charm lay in her youth and freshness; small of stature, with a face somewhat long and pale, she had blue eyes, fair and abundant hair, and the large nose, full lips and slightly underhung jaw which characterise all the house of Hapsburg. But what she lacked in outward attractions she made up for amply by her gentleness and goodness. She was modest, submissive and very religious, but, unfortunately for her future peace of mind, her views on life and its conduct were strict, narrow and conventional, such as was only to be expected from one brought up at the Austrian court, and she was

utterly incapable of adapting herself to, or even remotely understanding, a condition of society different from that in which she had been born and bred. Giovanna, in short, would have been an ideal wife for a husband of her own nationality, who shared her views and overlooked her limitations, but she must inevitably become both the victim and the irritation of one whose temperament, tastes and traditions were diametrically opposed to her own.

The marriage contract provided that Maximilian should give his sister a hundred thousand German florins, which sum Cosimo was to invest in Tuscan property which should produce five per cent. If Giovanna became a widow her entire dowry was to be returned to her. Cosimo and Francesco on their side assured the bride a yearly income of ten thousand scudi derived from the state customs, or, failing this, from the salt dues. If she survived Francesco and had living children she was to enjoy this income for the term of her natural life, even though she should return to Germany; it was only to cease on her re-marriage. The Duke further promised her jewels to the value of forty thousand scudi, but, should the marriage be dissolved, the Medici could take back this gift or its value. This contract was very favourable to the Austrian side, but Cosimo and his son were too anxious for the match to make hard conditions, and at that time the Emperor was in money difficulties and was eager to make the best bargain he could.

Meanwhile, preparations were going on apace in Florence for the proper reception of the bride, many of the alterations or decorations undertaken being permanent. The city was in a state of upset all summer. The marriage had been publicly announced to the people on the 21st March and the following day had been observed as a general holiday, beginning with mass in the Duomo and ending with fireworks, and the first stone had then been laid of the foundations upon which was to be raised the great granite column

which had come from the Baths of Caracalla in Rome and never yet been erected, but which was finally set up in the Piazza Santa Trinità that next July. The great fountain of Neptune was built in the Piazza del Duca, as it was then called, and the necessary water brought into the city from Arcetri in terra-cotta pipes, and that part of the Lung' Arno between the Ponte a Santa Trinità and the Ponte alla Carraia was raised and paved. The Palazzo Vecchio[1] was destined for the residence of the young couple, but as Cosimo considered it too far from the Pitti, where he and his family lived when in Florence, it was decided to unite the two palaces by a long corridor passing over the Arno. So Giorgio Vasari was sent for to undertake the work, and between March and November was built the long gallery which first spans the Via della Ninna by a lofty arch into the Uffizi Palace, and from the Uffizi passes over the Ponte Vecchio and then winds its way in and out through the intervening houses to the Palazzo Pitti on the further side of the Arno. Cosimo himself took a great personal interest in all these preparations and alterations and often superintended their progress. One day during the building of this corridor, the Duke was watching the demolition of a wall in one of the houses through which the new passage was to be made, when chance revealed to him the figure of a pretty girl of some twenty years, 'tall of stature, white and fair,' the daughter of a poor gentleman named Antonio Martelli, who had been startled by the accidental throwing down of some brickwork which had crashed through the wall of the room where she was sitting. Pretty Cammilla was consoled for her fright by the Duke himself, who never afterwards lost sight of her, and the consequences of this incident were more lasting than any one could then foresee.

Vasari was also commissioned to decorate the great hall

[1] Although spoken of by its now familiar name of Palazzo Vecchio, the Palace was at this time still called the Palazzo di Sua Eccellenza, or del Duca, and only when the court resided exclusively at the Pitti, after Ferdinando I., did it come to be known generally as the 'Old Palace.'

of the Palazzo Vecchio; the painting of the ceiling was completed and the walls covered with scenes representing the war between Pisa and Siena and with views of the chief cities of Tuscany. In honour of this marriage, too, the courtyard of the Palazzo was given its present appearance, the plain stone pillars being covered with graceful raised designs in stucco on a gilt ground and the walls painted with views of the principal cities of Germany. Unfortunately, Vasari's idea of improvement did not stop here, but in order that the gorgeous dresses and the lights of the myriads of candles at the wedding ceremony might be more effective, the walls of the cathedral of Florence were whitewashed all over! In another church, too, curious preparations were made, for in Santo Spirito the Fathers constructed a mechanical heaven which was to open and show a representation of the Annunciation, in accordance with the fashion of giving religious theatrical performances in churches. And far beyond the confines of the city, too, the impending arrival of the bride made a stir, for hosts of labourers were sent out to mend and improve the country roads over which she would have to travel.

Early in October Francesco set out to visit his future wife at Innsbrück, taking with him valuable gifts for her and her sisters. He wrote home to his brother Ferdinando that he was well satisfied with his bride, but what he wrote to Bianca is not recorded! From Innsbrück he went to Munich to visit Giovanna's sister and brother-in-law, thence to Vienna to see the Emperor, and after a second visit to Innsbrück on his way home, he returned to Florence in November to make the final preparations for his wedding.

The rivalry between the unfriendly brothers-in-law, Francesco de' Medici and Alfonso d'Este, obliged the idea of a double wedding to be abandoned, and in order to avoid more bother the Emperor ordered that the weddings should take place separately in the respective states of each bridegroom. The sisters travelled together as far as Trent, where they had to separate, Barbara with her retinue going to

Ferrara under the escort of the Cardinal of Trent, and Giovanna, the younger, setting out a few hours later for Florence, accompanied by the Papal Legate, Cardinal Carlo Borromeo.

Giovanna reached the Tuscan frontier on the 5th December, where she was met by a splendid company of knights and gentlemen, mounted and on foot, who greeted her as their lady and mistress. At Firenzuola the young Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici and old Messer Alamanno Salviati, Cosimo's uncle, were waiting to salute her and accompany her back to Florence, and all the way the company was constantly increased by other kinsmen or gentlemen who rode out to pay their respects to the young Archduchess. When she came to Prato the bride stopped to kiss the miraculous Girdle of the Virgin which is preserved in the cathedral there, and then continued her journey towards the villa of Poggio a Cajano, which place was to be her last halting-place before entering Florence and which she reached on the 9th December.

The villa of Poggio a Cajano stands on an eminence above a squalid village on the road between Florence and Pistoja, less than four miles distant from Prato. It was designed by Giuliano da San Gallo and built by Lorenzo de' Medici, and this stately house, with its immense park and gardens watered by the little river Ombrone, was then considered the most magnificent country residence of its time in Italy or elsewhere. When the Emperor Charles V. came to Florence in 1535 he dined at Poggio a Cajano, and marvelling at the size and beauty of the villa, he declared that it was no house for a mere private citizen. This was the scene chosen for the meeting of the bride and her new family. Duke Cosimo was waiting for her here and rode out to meet her, giving her the most cordial of welcomes and placing over her shoulders a magnificent necklace of pearls, diamonds and rubies worth some millions of scudi. Here was the bridegroom, too, accompanied by his sister, Donna Isabella Orsini, by Don Luigi di Toledo and other

relations and nobles, and in this splendid country house, afterwards and for ever to be tragically associated with the name of her rival and successor, the little bride spent a week, resting from the fatigues of her long wintry journey and making acquaintance with her new surroundings.

Kings and dukes, princes and prelates of all countries had been invited to the wedding, but the number of guests was unexpectedly diminished. Whilst waiting at Poggio Cosimo had received news of the serious illness of Pope Pius IV., who died on the 9th, the very day of Giovanna's arrival. This was a great loss for the Medici, for the Pope had been a good friend to their house, and was, moreover, a man of letters and a lover of peace. Many of the guests had to leave the scene of festivities in consequence, and all the cardinals assembled for the wedding, including Ferdinando de' Medici, were obliged to hasten to Rome immediately to attend the new conclave, and the ceremony in Florence was thus shorn of the decorative effect of their presence in all the glory of their scarlet robes.

During the week that the Archduchess had spent at Poggio a Cajano it had rained steadily every day, which must have given her a mournful impression of the land which was now her home, for the outlook across the plain of the Val d'Arno, the muddy roads, the fields brown and bare under a chill grey sky and blurred with ceaseless rain, is dreary in the extreme. But on that Sunday morning, the 16th December, when she was to make her state entry into Florence, everything was changed; the sky was blue, the sun shone brightly and the distant city seemed to beckon gaily through the clear winter air. Early in the morning Duke Cosimo, his younger son and all the male members of the family, with the guests, ecclesiastics and representatives of foreign princes and republics who had come to attend the wedding, with all the chief officers of state in festal attire, rode out from the Porta al Prato and advanced some two miles along the road to meet the Archduchess, who had also set out early from Poggio a Cajano with her retinue. When

the correct greetings had been exchanged, the procession was re-formed for the return to Florence. It was headed by the trumpeters of her Imperial Highness the Bride followed by those of the Duke and the Prince, all marching in good order and in separate groups. Then came, two and two on horseback, twenty of the Archduchess's pages in rich liveries of blue velvet, followed immediately by fourteen of Cosimo's pages dressed in yellow velvet and cloth of silver with white hose and breeches, and caps and shoes of green velvet. After these came the knights and esquires of the Duke and the Cardinal, all splendidly dressed and wearing valuable jewels, and a long list of Knights of St. Stephen, of the Order of Christ of Portugal, of St. James of Spain and the Knights of Malta, all wearing the magnificent costumes of their respective orders. Then followed an endless train of those who had accompanied the bride from Germany, nobles and gentlemen in their national costumes and attended by their followers. These immediately preceded the Archduchess Giovanna, who was dressed in white and mounted upon a beautiful horse, with Cosimo and the princes riding close beside her, and behind her all the Tuscan dignitaries, Italian and German court ladies, physicians, notaries and all the countless officials attached to a court, the rear of the great procession being brought up by several companies of soldiers with their devices and banners.

Having passed through the Porta al Prato, which had had towering artificial additions, supposed to represent Paradise, made to it for this occasion, the procession halted in the wide *prato* or meadow within the gates. Here were drawn up in order five hundred horsemen with a general at their head, and four thousand infantry, who saluted the bride with a burst of firing, while the cannon thundered out from the two forts on either side of Florence and the crowds cried 'Palle, Palle![1] Austria, Austria!' as though they would rend

[1] 'Palle, Palle!' being the party cry of the House of Medici, in allusion to the balls appearing on their coat-of-arms.

the skies. Here the bride dismounted, and kneeling down, kissed the cross presented to her by one of the bishops (she had a harder cross to kiss before she had done with life, poor Giovanna!). Immediately afterwards the crown of Tuscany was placed on her fair head by the Archbishop of Siena and the Bishop of Arezzo, after which ceremony she mounted her horse again, still wearing the crown, and continued her progress into the city beneath a canopy of cloth of silver borne by fifty noble Florentine youths dressed in crimson and gold. In every street were triumphal arches, groups of figures and animals were placed at different points in the city, and gorgeous decorations everywhere.

The procession passed by way of Borgo Ognissanti, the Lungarno, Via Tornabuoni and Via de' Cerretani to the Duomo, where the clergy waited at the door to receive the Archduchess, who entered and said another prayer. Starting again, the procession wound through various other streets and finally drew up before the principal entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio. Here in the courtyard waited the bridegroom and a throng of nobles and gentlemen, who escorted the bride to the great hall on the first floor, newly decorated by Vasari in her honour, where she was received by Francesco's sister, Donna Isabella, and fifty of the principal ladies of Florence, all splendidly attired, and who, according to custom, attended the Archduchess to the private apartments prepared for her that she might rest after the excitement and fatigue of the morning.

The next day, more magnificent gifts were presented to Giovanna, including, from Francesco, a girdle of diamonds, emeralds and rubies, alternated with pearls, and so long that the ends of it fell to the hem of her skirt; there was also a rich jewelled buckle and a long string of pearls to wear round her neck. All these things were personal gifts to Giovanna herself, and were not included amongst the jewels and ornaments presented officially to the Princess of Tuscany and looked upon as forming part of the family treasures of the Medici.

On Tuesday the marriage ceremony took place in the Duomo. The cupola was hung all round with flags and banners, rich draperies were displayed upon the white-washed walls and countless candles and torches were burning all over the edifice. The absence of the cardinals was compensated for by the presence of many other new arrivals, and the scene was one of unparalleled magnificence when the daughter of the Emperor Ferdinand entered upon that married life which was to bring her so little joy. But to-day gave no cause for misgivings as to the future, and a genuine welcome underlay the outward display, for the match was as popular with the people as it was advantageous to the ruling house. Donna Isabella rode with the bride in the coach which carried her to the cathedral and Duke Cosimo and the Prince of Bavaria led her to the altar between them. She was dressed all in white, her long golden hair flowing loose to her waist and a wreath of silken flowers sewn with pearls and precious stones upon her head, and in her every look and gesture there shone such modesty, purity and piety that the Florentines forgot her lack of beauty in their admiration of this rare bride who was so obviously sincere in the vows she took and the love she bore their Prince.

The long ceremony over, the bridegroom gave a grand banquet to a hundred young gentlewomen and dancing was kept up nearly all through the night, inaugurating the long series of entertainments and festivals which lasted all the season of Carnival. Balls, tournaments, hunting parties, theatrical and musical performances and marvellous mechanical spectacles, beloved of the Florentines then as now, followed each without interval, and with such display of wealth and ingenuity that, as Ammirato records, 'many men of letters were of opinion that since the decline of the Roman empire Italy had seen no games equal to these.'

Bianca's participation in the wedding festivities was that of a mere onlooker, and an onlooker, moreover, who kept

well in the background. Both she and Piero were still under sentence of arrest by the Republic, and since the Venetian ambassador was amongst the envoys, discretion bade them efface themselves with extra care. This official left, however, early in January, to avoid a meeting with the Polish ambassador, who arrived with his congratulations upon the same day, a disputed question of precedence forbidding the two personages ever to be in the same place together. But in spite of the wedding, of prudence and the Venetian ambassador, the bridegroom found time and means to escape from the guests and pay stolen visits to Bianca, visits for which it was now unnecessary to invent pretexts either to the complaisant Piero, secretly congratulating himself on this profitable adventure, or to the righteously indignant Ser Zanobi, helpless to restrain his son's actions and forced to receive his sovereign with respect and submission.

In the midst of all these various interests Cosimo and Francesco were further occupied in eagerly watching the progress of the conclave which immediately followed the death of Pius IV., for it was much to their interests to obtain the election of a Pope friendly to themselves. The rival princes all had their favourite cardinals, but though Cosimo succeeded in preventing the election of Cardinal Farnese, he did not achieve that of his own candidate, Cardinal Ricci. The winning votes were given to Cardinal Alessandrino, already well known throughout Italy as Fra Michele of the Inquisition and a firm partisan of the fanatic Paul IV., who was accordingly elected Pope under the title of Pius V., and the elevation of this austere and intolerant prelate was viewed with universal dread lest he should revive the fierce persecutions of his model. Cosimo disapproved of him also, but as he had always managed to keep on good terms with the preceding pontiffs, even under most difficult circumstances, he did not doubt but that he would also be able to establish friendly relations with the new Pope, who on his side knew all the advantages of an alliance

with Cosimo. This mutual understanding was presently cemented by the Carnesecchi affair, an episode which spread renewed terror of the Inquisition through all Italy.

Pietro Carnesecchi belonged to an eminent Florentine family which had always followed the fortunes of the House of Medici. This particular member had been secretary to Pope Clement VII., after whose death he emigrated to France, where the Queen's favour and his own merits soon raised him to a high position. But during the course of many journeyings he had fallen under the influence of the Calvinists, and though the Queen's protection was able to save him from the claws of the Inquisition so long as he remained in France, the inexorable Paul IV. threatened him again immediately he returned to Italy and established his dwelling in Venice, and this time it was Duke Cosimo who saved him from falling into the hands of the Inquisitor Fra Michele. During the pontificate of the more tolerant and pacific Pius IV., Cosimo was easily able to insure the safety of his family's adherent, and although Carnesecchi persisted in his heresy in spite of all warnings and dangers, he was allowed to remain in Florence and enjoy intimacy with the Duke, who loved the society of men of learning and intelligence, whatever their private religious opinions might be. But when Fra Michele himself became Pope, the persecution of heresy burst out again as furiously as ever; Carnesecchi was the chief adherent of the obnoxious sect in Italy and his removal was of the utmost importance for the extirpation of dangerous opinions in Tuscany. Pius V. was aware of the protection accorded him by Cosimo, and profiting by the newly sealed friendship and Cosimo's hopes of favours to come, he despatched the Master of the Vatican to Florence with a letter written by His Holiness's own hand, requesting the Duke to give up to the Pope's envoy the heretical servant who trusted him. Cosimo was in a dilemma, but his own interests prevailed and he actually allowed Carnesecchi to be arrested at his own table, a breach of loyalty and hospitality alike which cast a dark blot on the character of

a ruler in whom love of justice was generally a prominent virtue. The victim was taken to Rome and imprisoned in the dungeons of the Inquisition, and though Cosimo subsequently interceded with the Pope and did his best to save the man he himself had betrayed, it was all in vain and Carnesecchi was beheaded, maintaining his own opinions to the last, and his body afterwards burnt.

CHAPTER VIII

SPREADING HER WINGS

It is, unfortunately, impossible to deny that Bianca was secretly the Prince's favourite even at the time of Giovanna's arrival in Florence. She and Piero were still living with the old people in the Piazza San Marco; a change would have excited remark and it was wiser for them to be still mindful of public opinion, and for Bianca there was a special reason for exercising caution. There was no lack of comfort for her now and she presently began to resume the luxurious ways of her girlhood, although she certainly could not have obtained the necessary money from her husband or his family. She appeared at court, unobtrusively at first, and because she was known to be protected by Francesco the time-serving courtiers received her with admiration and outward respect.

Reassured by the ease and success of her first step towards emancipation, Bianca now flung off all trammels of moral or conscientious scruples and her schemes for the future began to take definite shape. Instead of the Prince's marriage being a check to her ever-strengthening influence over him, it proved quite the contrary, for Bianca had taken the bride's measure at a glance and knew the value of contrast, beauty against a plain face, Italian vivacity and variety against German stolidity, even though backed up by that irreproachableness of character to which she herself, alas! had ceased to aspire.

His marriage being an accomplished fact, Francesco saw no reason for further restricting his intercourse with his beautiful friend. He was imprudent enough to renew his

application to the Venetian Senate for the restitution of Bianca's dowry of six thousand scudi; but the only result was a respectful remonstrance from the Florentine resident in Venice to the effect that neither reasons of state nor the Prince's personal dignity would allow him to concern himself publicly with a private affair objectionable to the Council of Ten, which body had made its dissatisfaction with Francesco's action so evident that the Florentine resident advised him to let the matter drop.

'The insult offered to Bartolommeo Cappello,' wrote the sensible Bartoli, 'is yet too recent, and all the nobility here feeleth itself injured with him. For this Bartolommeo is not only a man of importance, but is kinsman to many noble houses and his brother-in-law is the Patriarch of Aquileia, and ye yourself know how greatly he is esteemed. Wherefore do I much doubt whether any advocate could be found to undertake this business for Bonaventuri and his wife. Moreover it doth appear unto me as scarce seemly that your Lordship's ambassador, who hath the honour to represent your person, should take upon himself the conduct of a private matter which cannot be honourably concluded. I do not say this because I find the matter tiresome, but because it is the truth. And also, it would excite much comment if a public ambassador were to meddle in a private affair which is so generally detested as is this, and the senators here would vent their displeasure not only upon me alone (which would be of no importance), but likewise upon your Lordship, which would put much hindrance in the way of my ordinary business here.'

Francesco was obliged to acknowledge the truth of Bartoli's representations and to abandon the money once and for all. Bianca had long since regained her freedom of action and he could more than compensate her for the loss of her own little fortune, which, after all, was a very minor matter compared with the publicity and friction between the two states which further persistence in the matter would entail.

Piero Bonaventuri looked on the present situation as neither more nor less than the reward of his own astuteness in securing such a wife; others had paid the price, he reaped the benefit. As payment for the golden horns he was more than content to wear, and also to facilitate Bianca's appearance at court, Piero had been given a post in the *Guardaroba* with a salary of six scudi a month, which once unhoped-for position, however, the ex-bank clerk looked upon merely as an earnest of better things to come. This was already in 1565, and in the following year he purchased an estate in the Mugello valley, for which his six scudi a month certainly did not suffice to pay!

Bianca's unmistakable if as yet unacknowledged position in the Prince's affections, and Piero's post as a court official, now made them conspicuous persons in Florence. The upstart husband was universally detested, but the wife achieved social success at once amongst those whose eagerness for advancement was greater than their sense of honour. But besides the power which the Prince's favour was supposed to give her, Bianca held potent weapons in her own beauty and the charm which she knew how to exert at will over all with whom she came in contact. In personal appearance she was of medium height and very well proportioned; her skin was white and clear; her hair reddish gold in colour, abundant, fine, silky, and curling prettily round her wide forehead. Her face was round and delicately rosy, with dimples on cheeks and chin when she smiled; she had a small mouth and good teeth, and her eyebrows were finely marked and beautifully curved. But Bianca's chief beauty lay in her eyes, large, almond-shaped and dark blue, and in them lay also her most potent spell; though bright and penetrating almost to hardihood, though often betraying by a scornful glance her natural pride and perversity, she could throw into those lovely eyes such an expression of tenderness and wistful innocence that it was hard to believe they were not mirrors of the soul within; and few there were on whom she turned her gaze with

intent to fascinate who did not fall victims to this nameless charm and swear themselves her bond-slaves, till they quitted her presence and the spell was broken! Her manner, too, was full of natural grace and wholly unaffected, and her ready wit, alertness of mind and gaiety made her a most fascinating companion. To the sombre and morosely inclined Francesco the attraction of such a character was irresistible.

Bianca now began to realise some of those dreams of social success which her marriage with Piero seemed until lately to have put out of her reach for ever. She dressed finely, paid visits to the great ladies of her acquaintance and gradually took her place in the gay life of the city. But it was out of the question to receive her new associates in the narrow house in the Piazza San Marco, even if her father-in-law would have consented; and Ser Zanobi looked with disapproval and foreboding at the doings of his son and daughter-in-law and held himself aloof, though he dared not openly remonstrate for fear of the Prince's wrath. So it became urgently necessary to find another dwelling for the young Bonaventuri, where Bianca could spread her social wings, and where, above all things, the lover could visit his lady without let or hindrance. The question of money was never raised in these days: it would seem that Francesco's purse was ever open and ever full. On the 12th September 1567, Piero Bonaventuri, acting for his wife as usual in such transactions, bought from the syndics and officials of the Mercatanzia a house in the Via Maggio, in the parish of San Jacopo Sopr' Arno, for the sum of 1800 gold florins (a florin being about seven lire). Francesco not only supplied the money for the purchase of the house, but he further had the interior altered and improved by Buontalenti to suit Bianca's taste and needs, and the elaborate decorations of the exterior were carried out by Poccetti, at Francesco's command. Piero and his wife took possession of their new abode in November, and in order that their means might be equal to their increased expenditure, the

Prince presented his beloved with the large estate and farm of Cerreto, in the district of Barberino di Mugello, and the income derived from this placed her beyond all fear of financial embarrassment.

Now that Bianca had achieved her wish and was established in her own house, with an independent income, she threw off all restraint and caution, appearing in the most gorgeous costumes of any lady in the city and wearing priceless jewels, regardless of the comment naturally evoked by such magnificence and the conclusions inevitably drawn as to the source of such wealth. Piero grew more insolent and exacting every day and ran into every possible danger, and Francesco, who had been warned that Venice still intended to have Piero assassinated, was obliged to protect him for the sake of all parties. Thus the intrigue, which had at first been carefully hidden from the eyes of the public, was now known to all and became the subject of jeers and contempt even amongst the lowest of the citizens. The only person who remained in ignorance of the growing scandal was the one most concerned, the Archduchess Giovanna, who secluded herself too entirely from the Florentines ever to hear any of their gossip, and the German attendants whom she had brought with her and by whom she was always surrounded were not likely to inform her of her husband's relations with the lovely Venetian, whose beauty she admired with all the innocent envy of her good and gentle nature.

The character of the Archduchess herself unfortunately contributed not a little towards driving her husband from her side. The honeymoon over, the differences between the ill-matched princely pair soon became manifest. The principles and traditions in which Giovanna had been educated were radically opposed to those of the persons amongst whom she must now pass her life; works of piety and religious exercises were her chief occupations, and she rigorously avoided everything which she deemed frivolous or which might distract her mind from serious things. Her

austere and melancholy temperament and her strict code of morals agreed ill with the customs prevailing in Florence of the Renaissance, customs which she, though mistress of that corrupt court, would have been powerless to alter even had she been strong enough to make the attempt. She was too ignorant and inexperienced to realise that her surest way of obtaining influence lay in conciliation, and too limited in intelligence to be able, even outwardly, to adapt herself to her surroundings; and her disapproving aloofness, combined with the rigid education which had divested her of all natural grace and charm, effectually annoyed and repelled her husband and made him inclined to confine his relations with her to those of mere duty and respect. Cosimo perceived the situation with real anxiety and did his best to keep the young couple on good terms with each other, counselling Giovanna to have patience and indulgence for the gaiety of youth and to believe in the sincerity of Francesco's love for her, and urging the Prince Regent to pay more attention to his domestic duties and be less careless as to how he provided matter for scandalmongering tongues. But the Duke was on the horns of a dilemma; he could not quarrel openly with his son, yet he sincerely pitied Giovanna and trembled lest the intrigue should be reported beyond the borders of Italy and Austria take offence at Francesco's behaviour to the Archduchess. There must be peace at all costs until the Pope should have fulfilled his darling wish and created him Grand Duke of Tuscany, with precedence over all the other princes of Italy.

Far from diminishing his love for Bianca, these domestic dissensions only made Francesco the more infatuated by provoking comparisons between the restraint of the Pitti Palace (whither the young court had removed on the abdication of Cosimo) and the prim and sad-faced Austrian who could arouse in him no other feeling save that of irritation, and the comfortable liberty to be enjoyed a short length of street away, in that painted house in the Via Maggio, where the laughing face of the Venetian was ever ready to soothe

his ruffled temper and provide distraction from the irksome business of government and state affairs. Thus the companionship which he had first sought in the ardour of an idle love adventure grew into a habit, and the habit presently became a necessity which in time bound him to Bianca with ties he could not break.

For the first few months after the marriage, however, all went fairly well; then, when her husband began to neglect her, his absences by day and night were attributed by the simple wife to the pressure of state business. She was now expecting her first child and had fallen into a condition of depression and ill-health which rendered her more than ever irksome to Francesco, and she unconsciously made matters worse by the endearments and demonstrations of affection which she showered on Francesco in the hope of keeping him at her side, but which only served to irritate him the more.

Although the Archduchess was wholly unaware that she had a rival in Francesco's affections, she presently began to resent his behaviour; and moreover, the Emperor's daughter, accustomed to the life of a great court, found herself out of place in a small princely one, the organisation of which was not many steps removed from that of a large private household. She wrote frequent complaints to her own family, which did not predispose Maximilian favourably towards Cosimo and his son, and when in April 1569 the Archduke Charles went to Italy to visit his two married sisters, he spent a week in Florence (where all kinds of games and entertainments were arranged in his honour), and tried his best to mend matters for Giovanna. If her husband found her dull and wearisome, however, the good impression she had made on the Florentines at her arrival had never been effaced; they adored her for her virtues and her charity and fiercely resented the indignity put upon their 'Regina Giovanna' by the Prince and his adventurous Venetian.

But other things besides Giovanna's grievances now occurred to increase Austria's irritation against Cosimo. Towards the end of this year, 1569, he at last obtained the

long-desired title of Grand Duke, as a sort of sequel to the rejoicings over the massacre of Saint Bartholomew. He had assisted the Most Christian King with troops and money in his crusade against the Huguenots, and the Pope judged this to be a favourable time for granting him the higher title. The Duke of Ferrara was so furious at the success of his rival and brother-in-law that he stirred up the Emperor also to object, declaring that the Pope had no right to confer the title and that in so doing he infringed on the Imperial authority.

In March of the following year Cosimo journeyed to Rome for the purpose of being there crowned Grand Duke by the Pope, and the ceremony was performed with great state and magnificence. When Pius proceeded to the chapel, clad in full pontifical robes and carrying the Blessed Rose in his hand, his train was borne by Cosimo, who was himself a most gorgeous figure. He wore a tunic of richest brocade with a raised velvet design in green and turquoise blue, which, says Lapini, produced a most exquisite and harmonious effect; over this was belted his sword in a crimson velvet sheath with gold buckles and trappings; his *toga* or mantle was of crimson velvet with wide sleeves lined with ermine and an ermine cape, and on his head was a black velvet cap. He was accompanied by his son-in-law, Paolo Orsini, and by Marcantonio Colonna, who remained at his side and held his crown and sceptre during the reading of the Creed and Gospel. The new Grand Duke had had his crown made in Florence and had taken it with him to Rome; it was valued at two hundred thousand scudi, being set with wonderful pearls and precious stones, and his sceptre was of silver, surmounted by the red ball of the Medici and the red lily of Florence. The ceremony over, the procession returned in the same order, Cosimo walking behind the Pope and carrying his train, and as they passed through the wide saloons of the Vatican on their way to the Pope's private apartments, Cosimo was immensely gratified by the acclamation and

cries of 'Palle, Palle! Viva, Viva!' with which he was greeted by the populace there assembled. The visitor had, of course, brought many valuable gifts for the Pope, amongst them being a golden chalice of exquisite design, the work of Benvenuto Cellini, in return for which His Holiness was pleased to confer upon the Grand Duke his blessing and the rose he had carried in his hand at the coronation ceremony!

As the outcome of Cosimo's visit to Rome there arose, however, another matter which further excited the indignation of the Emperor Maximilian, indignation doubtless fomented in this case by Giovanna and her confidants. For it was a matter which touched the ducal family, in its private life, more intimately than the conferring of a new though long-expected title.

Pius V. had taken advantage of Cosimo's presence in Rome to discuss with him the affairs of Europe and especially those of the Papal states, being glad of the advice and co-operation of so experienced a statesman and ruler; and also his projected formation of a league for the protection of Christianity against the ever-increasing power of the Turks. Cosimo, on his side, seized the opportunity of his visit to the Pontiff to confess certain irregularities in his domestic arrangements which were weighing on his always active conscience.

The Duke's connection with the first companion of his retirement had come to an end some two years before this date, not without an element of tragedy. After Francesco's marriage Cosimo had taken Eleonora degli Albizzi with him to his villa of Castello and other country houses, where she became the chief solace of his leisure hours. After the birth of her first child, Cosimo seriously considered the question of marrying her, as much from motives of affection as for the purpose of silencing scandal and legitimising his offspring, and he discussed the matter with Sforza Almeni, a confidential attendant who had been in his personal service for many years. The faithful Sforza was aghast at the con-

templated step; but knowing that it was useless to remonstrate with his master once he had made up his mind, and influenced perhaps by the jealousy of an old retainer for a new favourite, he determined to betray the Duke's confidence in the Duke's own interests and lay the matter before Francesco. He took the opportunity of Cosimo being absent for a few days from Castello, where the household was then living, to obtain a private audience of the Regent, and after many protestations of good faith and fidelity, told him the whole story. Francesco had already had disquieting suspicions of his own on the same subject, and his dismay at finding his suspicions so well founded was so great that he could not long keep silence; and in defiance of all respect and prudence, he spoke openly to his father and reproached him with meditating an unworthy marriage. Cosimo instantly knew whence his son had obtained his information, and angrily warning him not to believe in the gossip of servants, he bade him not dare to judge his father but to attend rather to the mending of his own notoriously evil ways. And he turned his back upon Francesco, calm in appearance but inwardly seething with that terrible anger which was wont to possess him with overwhelming force, and which was all the more terrible because of his power of outward self-control, giving no hint of his next action. Straight back to Castello went Cosimo and immediately banished Sforza out of his sight for ever, but on the imprudent man venturing again into the presence to beg forgiveness, the Duke, with a cry of 'Traitor!' plunged his dagger into his breast.

To conceal the murder of Almeni was an impossibility, and was, indeed, never attempted; it was immediately known all through the state, and even from Venice down to Rome. That a great lord like Cosimo should kill his faithful servant, and lower himself to do it with his own hand, caused universal surprise and was, indeed, scarcely credited; and now this deed is bracketed with the murder of Don Garzia as one of the darkest blots on the Duke's character.

His anger having vented itself in action, Cosimo regretted his deed, though, in truth, chiefly because he had himself perpetrated it in his rage, and he did his best to make amends, both in his liberality towards the victim's family and in his own subsequent line of action. A few months later, in May 1567, Eleonora gave birth to a boy, afterwards known as Don Giovanni de' Medici and a valiant soldier. But Cosimo had realised that the publicity given to the connection by the death of Sforza Almeni and the general disgust it aroused had made a marriage with her impossible, and his ardour having been effectually cooled by the annoyance it had brought him, he settled an income on her and married her to Carlo Panciatichi, who led her a miserable life and finally shut her up in a convent. But her subsequent history can find no place here.

So much for Eleonora degli Albizzi. But the usually wise Duke gave no heed to the unpopularity of his changed mode of life, and he who had vaunted that he was imitating Charles V. in abdicating his throne, did not carry his imitation any further. Eleonora was soon replaced by her own cousin, Cammilla Martelli, whom Cosimo had first seen accidentally during the building of the corridor over the Arno, and whose superior beauty had probably helped to cool his love for her predecessor. In this case, too, the girl's parents gave willing consent to what they looked upon as their daughter's promotion, in view of the material profits they and all their family derived from the connection. But Cammilla was cleverer than Eleonora and understood how to keep a hold on her elderly lover, and after the birth of a daughter, who was named Virginia, she succeeded in coaxing from him a promise of marriage.

All these adventures did the new Grand Duke confess to the Pope on the occasion of his coronation and for the easing of his conscience. Pius, who was well aware of the facts, declared that he could never countenance such a state of things, which was unworthy of a Grand Duke and a bad example to the nation; and he exhorted Cosimo, if he could

not send Cammilla away, to marry her and make the marriage public. Now this was exactly what Cosimo wanted, but he wished the marriage to be imposed upon him by the Pope as a duty in order that he might have an unquestionable weapon against his son's anger and the ridicule of the people. Immediately on his return to Florence, therefore, and without informing his family of his intention, Cosimo was married to Cammilla Martelli in the chapel of the Pitti Palace by the priest of the parish, in the presence of her parents, who had all along counted on this establishment of their daughter's position; and it was only a few days later that the fact became public property.

Reassured by the transitory character of his father's first connection and relying on the impression created by the unfortunate tragedy which had marked its close, the young Regent had not greatly troubled himself about Cammilla. Certainly it was an unpleasant episode, and Giovanna in particular grieved over this lapse on the part of the father-in-law she loved and respected; but a sister more or less in the Medici family did not matter, and they counted on Cammilla being married off safely, as had been done with Eleonora degli Albizzi. Great, then, was the fury of both Francesco and the Cardinal Ferdinando when they heard that their father had really made the girl his wife. But protest was now useless, nothing would be gained by adding quarrels to scandal, and their sister, Donna Isabella, was the first to counsel quiet acceptance of a fact they could not alter. So Francesco was forced to hide his displeasure, more especially as, in order not to offend the Archduchess or interfere with her rights as first lady in the land, Cosimo had declared that Cammilla would be merely his wife in private, and would have neither the title, authority nor position of Grand Duchess; and that, further, he was about to retire altogether into private life and reside permanently at Pisa.

So matters settled down in Italy; but the Emperor took dire offence at the marriage, declaring it an insult to the

Imperial family that his sister should thus be related to a subject, and one, moreover, of far from exalted extraction. He wrote full of anger to the Archduchess on the subject, and Giovanna imprudently showed the letter to the Grand Duke, thereby arousing the anger of the self-willed prince, who brooked no interference with his private affairs when his obstinacy was awakened. And thus the breach between the two families was still further widened.

CHAPTER IX

DANGER SIGNALS

During these years Bianca had been quietly and steadily establishing her position in Florence, and, to the secret admiration of Francesco, had even succeeded in obtaining a firm foothold in the Palace itself, for which the close proximity of her house in the Via Maggio to the Pitti gave her every advantage. By virtue of Piero's position as a court official (in itself a fact for scornful comment), she had been presented to the Archduchess; and using every opportunity of bringing herself into notice, although apparently by chance, or of rendering unobtrusive service, she had contrived that she should not remain unmarked amongst the greater ladies of the household. The childlike grace and simplicity of manner she could assume at will, the wistful eyes and lovely smile, were used with all due respect upon the royal lady till they lured an answering smile from her unaccustomed lips. She exerted herself to cast the whole spell of her charm over Giovanna, paying her the utmost deference and attention; and the poor little Princess, ill and unhappy, was easily duped into believing that in Bianca she had one true and disinterested friend amongst her subjects, to whom she could unburden herself with the certainty of being understood and sympathised with. To this one Italian, at least, she felt she could speak as freely as to her own Austrians, and into this new friend's willing ear she poured the tale of her daily difficulties. And the astute Venetian consoled her for Francesco's absences, describing how she herself was neglected by Piero for the

sake of business, and pointing out how the Prince, having so many more responsibilities, must of necessity be more often absent.

What might Cosimo have thought could he have heard the woman he held as the chief danger to his son thus using his own arguments and counselling patience to his daughter-in-law to further her own ends?

'And surely,' argued the brilliant Bianca, looking at the pale face of the Austrian, with its long nose, heavy jaw and listless eyes, 'it is better for us wives to accept the inevitable with cheerfulness and to greet our husbands with bright faces when they do return, for then will they come all the more quickly.'

Such arguments urged by one whom she deemed in a position similar to her own as regarded husbands, had for the moment more effect on Giovanna than all Cosimo's exhortations. To the wonder of the court Bianca soon became first favourite with poor Giovanna, who sent for her on every occasion, drove out through the city with her rival beside her, and, in order that there might be no excuse for Bianca refusing to leave home, she bade her bring the little Pellegrina to spend the days at the Pitti with the baby princesses, Eleonora and Anna.

Bianca employed all her ingenuity and caution to maintain this extraordinary position, only achieved and made possible through the innocence and ignorance of Giovanna. To be the husband's favourite was as dangerous as it was profitable, but to be the wife's favourite was wholly advantageous. The countless tales and scandals about Bianca which circulated in the city, and which all her splendour and apparent indifference had not been able to disperse, were kept in check by the action of the unconscious Princess in showing herself constantly in the company of her successful rival. The Florentines concluded that in spite of appearances the tales were probably untrue, or at least grossly exaggerated; for they could not believe, what was the actual fact, that Giovanna had remained so long in ignorance of a

state of things which was common knowledge, not only in Florence but through all Italy.

But Bianca was a woman of infinite tact; the Florentines hated her for her treachery to the Archduchess, but they hated Francesco still more and despised him into the bargain, while to her at least they accorded a sort of cynical admiration for her beauty and wit and the amazing manner in which she conducted what would have been for another an impossible situation. Moreover, being a shrewd people, they argued that since the evil was there they might as well turn it to account; and therefore Bianca's intercession with the Prince was asked and favours procured through her even by those who most industriously abused her, and if she promised help in any matter it was looked upon as settled.

The Archduchess was not, however, the only one of the ducal family who favoured Bianca. Francesco's sister, Isabella Orsini, Duchess of Bracciano, the fairest and most brilliant of Cosimo's daughters, had soon made friends with her, though from motives very different from those disinterested ones which had actuated Giovanna's friendship. Isabella was well aware of the influence exercised over Francesco by the Venetian; but if she looked with an indulgent eye on her brother's defections, it was with the hope and expectation that when need arose he would do the same by hers. Isabella was married to Paolo Giordano Orsini, Duke of Bracciano, but by her father's wish she had continued to live in Florence, where she had her apartments in the Palazzo Medici in the Via Larga (afterwards called the Riccardi), and but seldom accompanied her husband to Rome. Paolo was a sinister man of fierce passions, the lover of the notorious Vittoria Accoramboni. But while he took every form of liberty for himself, he was ready to punish the least inclination to infidelity on the part of his wife, though he threw temptation in her way by leaving her alone for the greater part of the year, under the nominal guardianship of Troilo Orsini, a young cousin of his own.

Bianca's life now became a steady march towards the goal of her ambition. Wealth and independence, which once were all she craved, were hers, but her ideas had widened with success. She must hold the court which covertly sneered at her in the hollow of her hand; she must set her foot on the necks of those Florentines who spat at her even while they begged and cringed. She had no wish to do needless harm to any one; she preferred to do good and please if it were in her power. But she would spare none in the way and was ready to trample ruthlessly on the welfare and happiness, even on the lives if need be, of those who were obstacles in her path. To this state of mind had she come at this juncture, and that dark race amongst whom her lot had been so strangely cast, upon whose fortunes her own now depended, were not those to teach her gentler thoughts or lead her back to the straight path from which she had strayed so far.

Perhaps in all the long history of the Medici family no individual group had been so lawless or so unfortunate as that which now formed the centre of this most corrupt of courts. Cosimo's health had quite failed and he was a semi-paralysed invalid in retirement at Pisa, his condition aggravated by a wife whose social elevation through her marriage with the Grand Duke had turned her head and made her frivolous and overbearing. The Cardinal Ferdinando, dignified and upright, strong as Bianca herself and the only one she had to fear, lived in Rome; Pietro, worst of all, was usually away on military service in Spain, but was an untamable evil-doer when he was at home; Giovanni, Cosimo's son by Eleonora degli Albizzi, was a child; Isabella Orsini and Eleonora of Toledo, Pietro's neglected young wife, brilliant and lovely women, had neither of them escaped the contamination of example and had sought refuge from unhappiness in love kinder than their husbands'. As for Francesco, sombre and violent, he was completely under Bianca's dominion, and had even sworn that he would make her his wife if ever they should

both be freed from their respective spouses. Here was food for ambition, and Bianca would in all probability have obtained a divorce from Piero if he had not subsequently brought about his own death by his imprudence.

Piero had continued to enjoy to the full his share of Francesco's favours and benefits, the reward of his tacit consent to his wife's dishonour. This unforeseen good fortune, for such he deemed it, had soon turned his head; he forgot his former insignificance and poverty, pitilessly oppressed all over whom his office gave him authority, and behaved generally towards the Florentines with the utmost pride and intolerance. This behaviour was dangerous for Piero himself and also for his master. The Florentines were prone to remember from time to time that the Medici had robbed them of their freedom and put an end to the Republic; and, though the ruling house had successfully stamped out numerous revolts, discontent was rife and ready to make itself manifest whenever an opportunity offered to show that they bore the Medici yoke unwillingly. They hated Cosimo, but they hated his son more, for they perceived very early in his reign that while he possessed all his father's bad qualities he had none of his many good ones. And if they hated the Prince, infinitely more did they hate the adventurer whom, to serve his own base ends, he had set over them. They sought a way of getting rid of him, and Bonaventuri's own deeds soon furnished it. He was the kind of man who, given rope enough, will sooner or later inevitably hang himself.

Piero found it convenient to ignore Bianca's intrigue with Francesco because of the wealth and other advantages he himself derived therefrom. Moreover, inconstancy being conspicuous amongst his other base qualities, he had long ago tired of his wife, and her infidelity provided him with a good excuse for treating her with indifference and resuming his old habit of running after other women. Nothing was sacred from his impudence, and he is even said to have

Photo Alinari

COSIMO DE' MEDICI, FIRST GRAND DUKE OF TUSCANY

From a portrait by Bronzino in the Pitti Palace, Florence

attempted to play the Prince's own game by paying court to the Archduchess Giovanna, as a kind of mutual revenge on Francesco and Bianca, a proceeding which the indignant Archduchess scarcely deigned to notice, but which, nevertheless, tended to arouse her suspicions and make things uncomfortable for the Prince.

About this time, however, Piero formed an intrigue with a beautiful Florentine who had been one of Francesco's passing fancies. This was Cassandra de' Ricci, the widow of a certain Bongianni, a lady whose amours had already made her notorious; and Piero was imprudent enough to boast publicly of the favour she showed him, in spite of the warning furnished him by the fate of two other gentlemen who had paid for similar imprudence with their lives. Utterly disregarding the frantic jealousy of her elderly husband, Cassandra had had lover after lover. One, a youth of twenty-four, belonging to the Cavalcanti family, was murdered early one morning as he left her house and the body dressed in peasant dress by the assassins, adding insult to injury, and left on the doorstep, to the consternation of the whole city. Another, Messer Simone da Filicaja, was stabbed to death, and Vincenzio Sernigi, whose youthful imprudence had led him to respond to the lady's smiles, was forced six years afterwards to beg permission from the Grand Duke to bear arms for his own protection, although he had no more dealings with the dangerous beauty, so dire was the vengeance with which her husband and kinsmen threatened all who helped to sully the honour of the family.

But neither practical example nor friendly advice had any effect on Piero; he heeded it all as little as he had heeded Giambattista's warnings long ago in Venice. He continued to make love to Cassandra, now a widow, and therefore in her own estimation free to do as she chose, and he so aroused the anger of the powerful Ricci family (who already hated him sufficiently as an upstart) that they determined on revenge. They immediately complained to the Prince, praying him to

restrain Piero's offensive behaviour if he would not have worse things than a reprimand happen to his favourite.

Francesco knew by experience the worthlessness of Cassandra and the graceless impudence of Piero Bonaventuri, and that the complaints of the Ricci were but too well founded. He was furious, but his hands were tied by his own intrigue with the offender's wife. Therefore he bade the Ricci leave Piero to him, as he would see to it that the insults ceased, and they themselves must watch Cassandra. Francesco was heartily sick of Piero, whose presumption exceeded all bounds, even permitting him to treat the Prince as an equal. So he determined to seize this opportunity of putting an end to the annoyance once and for all. A certain amount of caution was necessary, however, as a quarrel would have been awkward and would have interfered with his own comfort, as well as occasioning further scandal in the city. So he sent for Piero and showed his displeasure as prince to subject, the safest way with such as he.

'I have befriended you and your wife,' said Francesco, now haughtily oblivious of all private relations, 'and ye have presumed upon my friendship and thereby created scandal and evil-speaking in the city. Your imprudence causeth me great embarrassment, which I will suffer no longer. Your visits to Cassandra must cease; or, if she be necessary to you, ye must at least be more circumspect, for the Ricci threaten you with a danger which I am powerless to avert. They will assuredly cause you to be assassinated if ye continue to behave as ye are now doing, and I cannot bring you to life again.'

Bonaventuri, however, assured Francesco that his relations with the lady did not overstep the bounds of propriety, and that the Ricci were only moved to complain of him through jealousy and envy of Piero's good fortune in enjoying the Prince's favour. He declared that they were too proud to admit him to their company, not holding him to be of sufficiently good birth, and were angry that in spite of them he had gained admittance to the household of one of their

family. Knowing the pride of the Ricci, Francesco had no answer to make, and Piero went on to improve the occasion by begging the Prince publicly and legally to acknowledge the former title to nobility possessed by the Bonaventuri family, thus giving him the position he wanted and weakening the case of his enemies. Being aware that this course would gratify Bianca, Francesco consented; on condition, however, that immediately afterwards Piero should quit Florence and go to France until the scandal should have subsided. But this condition did not fit in with Piero's plans and the matter dropped for the time being, Francesco resolving to speak to Bianca and concoct some method of getting rid of the incubus, whilst Piero himself secretly vowed vengeance on the Ricci and defiance of Francesco.

Openly, however, Francesco was forced to appear satisfied with Piero's explanation, and dismissed him with the non-committal words:

'I know naught of what ye tell me; do what seemeth best to yourself, and if it endeth evilly, 'tis your own misfortune.'

But now, as a cloud appears out of an apparently cloudless sky and storm threatens to sink the vessel but shortly before sailing over a glassy sea, so disaster seemed suddenly to be hanging over both the Bonaventuri. Whilst her husband had been jeopardising his position and arousing Francesco's anger, Bianca's own affairs had received a very serious check, for her carefully fostered relations with Francesco's wife had been destroyed. Whether her long immunity had bred over-confidence, or whether Bianca had somehow given offence or stimulated afresh the jealousy of the other ladies, it is impossible to say; but the fact remains that the Archduchess's eyes had at last been opened and the operation had been performed by a woman, and, as generally happens in such cases, by a most pious and virtuous woman, who was moved by the best intentions and

into whose mind such a thing as jealousy of the offender was, of course, never supposed to enter.

One of the principal Italian ladies appointed to attend on Giovanna was the Countess Fulvia di Santa Fiora, highborn, wealthy, handsome, and imbued with piety and virtue as strict as Giovanna's own. It is not surprising, therefore, that there should have existed an instinctive antagonism between her and Bianca, and that the deception practised on the unsuspecting Princess should have appeared to the Countess merely what it actually was, a piece of abominable treachery, doubly abominable in one who had usurped the most favoured place in Giovanna's circle. The pious lady-in-waiting was many a time on the point of revealing the truth, without pausing to consider whether it would not be far kinder to the Princess to leave her in ignorance. Finally one day, when she saw Giovanna lavish caresses and affectionate words on Bianca, Donna Fulvia's virtuous indignation got the better of her discretion and she let fall some words of warning, which she was immediately forced to follow up with a complete revelation of what was commonly reported in court and city.

Giovanna's grief and anger were piteous to witness; the greater the ignorance the more terrible the surprise, and her tears and lamentations over the double loss of husband and friend would have softened the heart of a worse man than Francesco, had he not been so entirely under the influence of an absorbing passion for another woman. But the Prince was furious at his wife's discovery of his intrigue and obstinately denied it to her face, at the same time reproaching her with being credulous and fanciful. Her eyes once opened, however, the story needed no confirmation beyond the thousand trifling incidents, half forgotten till they crowded now into her memory, which, viewed in the light of her new knowledge, left no room for doubt. And her despair and indignation were increased by the further discovery which inevitably followed, that the wealth of the Bonaventuri couple was derived solely from the Prince and his gifts.

Naturally the rupture with the Princess materially affected Bianca's position, especially as it happened just at the time when Piero was making himself particularly obnoxious to some of the principal citizens of Florence. So long as she was able to pose as Giovanna's friend she could pretend to ignore public opinion, but now that her official position was lost, there was no shield between her and the sneers and jests of the Florentines save her own superbly acted indifference and the Prince's favour. From the Pitti she was henceforth banished, of course, and for the moment there seemed no course open to her except to quit the city for a time. She and Piero had recently purchased, for the sum of 3954 gold florins, the villa of La Tana at Candeli, a village near Florence, and hither she betook herself until the unpleasant and dangerous agitation against her should have somewhat subsided. The monotony of her exile was varied by the interests of her new estate and by frequent visits from Francesco, whose anger at the fresh outbreak of scandal was entirely confined to his wife and her ladies.

Though Bianca fled from the storm, it continued to rage at the court. Both the Countess Fulvia and her husband were in dire disgrace with Francesco, while poor Giovanna was made to suffer bitterly for the too great zeal of her lady-in-waiting, being treated with coldness and even greater neglect than ever by Francesco, and made to feel that she, and not he, was the culprit. All the Archduchess's piety did not avail to teach her calmness and resignation in this her first real trial. She shut herself up in her apartments and refused to see any one but her own women, whom she could trust. But at last her confessor persuaded her to appeal to her father-in-law, who seemed to be her only real friend in the land of her adoption, and to him she accordingly wrote with her own hand, in her faulty and pitiful Italian, imploring him to rid her of her rival.

For some time already Cosimo had been seriously uneasy about Francesco's methods of government and the characters and qualities of the persons by whom he was

surrounded. He had known his son to be weak and obstinate, but he was now forced to realise that he did not possess the ability to rule which he had believed he possessed in a sufficient degree to outweigh his defects, and he feared secretly that the young Regent would presently commit some grave mistake. He therefore did his best to advise and control him; but Francesco resented supervision, even though it had been stipulated for at his father's abdication, and he retorted by spying on and criticising Cosimo's private life. But neither of them desired an open rupture, and, though Cosimo was well aware of Francesco's domestic dissensions, he waited to interfere until his help should be expressly requested. On receiving Giovanna's letter he wrote her an immediate reply from Pisa, sympathising with her and assuring her of his love and devotion as his daughter and sovereign lady.

'Your letter caused me no little sorrow,' he wrote, 'but ye must not believe all that ye are told, for in courts there are never lacking those who do delight in spreading scandal. I know that you and the Prince do love each other, but it is needful to bear with each other in some things and to make allowance for the impetuousness of youth: and likewise must ye learn discreetly to endure evils that time will speedily correct, for otherwise will there be kindled a scorn and hatred betwixt you that will never be extinguished. I do not think that the Prince doth let your Highness want for aught; he beareth you constant company and giveth you all ye can ask for yourself or your household. If your Highness will but consider your sisters, perchance ye will be more content with your own condition than ye are now, for I do know how more than one of them hath been treated. Do not let your head be filled with foolish tales, but exercise your discretion and affection and show yourself more cheerful towards the Prince, and I will speak my mind unto him likewise. And let your Highness busy herself with the affairs of the house and leave the reins of government unto him, for then ye will assuredly have a happier life, with greater peace and comfort. And I

myself will never fail to do all in my power to content you, wherefore ye may rely upon me as your most loving father and servant.'

Cosimo also wrote to his son, summoning him to Pisa, and Francesco obeyed; he was probably conscious that this time his wife and his father had a right to complain. What arguments Cosimo used it is impossible to say, but Francesco returned to Florence in a softened state of mind and personally presented the Grand Duke's homage and salutations to the Princess. The interview was difficult, but Francesco was contrite, or pretended to be so, and Giovanna, justly offended but only too willing to forgive and forget, was not hard to conciliate. So peace was made between these two. But though Giovanna was happy again for the moment, she was not altogether reassured as to the future, as her letter to Cosimo telling him of the result of his peacemaking shows:

'I did well recognise the work of your Highness, and that it is through your favour that the Prince my Lord hath pardoned me (although I do know that I have committed no fault whatsoever!) and that we have made peace together. May God ever keep His hand over us, so that we may live together henceforth in peace and unity. And I pray your Highness to use your authority, so that none of those who have been the cause of this dissension shall ever dare to do such a thing again.'

Poor, pitiful little letter, written as before with her own hand in childish and faulty Italian, for she had never mastered the language! It betrayed only too clearly to Cosimo that though peace had been restored, Giovanna was still distrustful, and that she foresaw that the trouble with the Venetian was not yet done with.

In order to complete the pacification of Giovanna, and perhaps not sorry to escape for a time, even in his wife's company, from the vexed question of Piero and the Ricci, Francesco took her at the end of August for a month's tour through the states of Tuscany, and everywhere they were received with rejoicing and festivities. Of all the places they

visited, the Archduchess liked Siena best, and perhaps the breezes which blew over the lovely little city, seated high on its red hills, were refreshing to the northern-bred Austrian after the trials and troubles endured in all the summer heat of Florence. At Pisa they were received by the Grand Duke himself, who repeated and confirmed by word of mouth all that he had written to his daughter-in-law, comforting and petting her with affectionate solicitude and fatherly advice. For Giovanna was always a favourite with both Cosimo and his second son, the Cardinal Ferdinando, who was still living entirely in Rome and had not yet begun to take any active part in the family dramas at home.

The travellers returned to Florence on the last day of September. This month had been a happy time for the poor little Princess, perhaps the last bit of real happiness she was to know with Francesco, for she never learnt to treat him with indifference or adapt herself to the manners and morals prevailing at the Tuscan court. A year later, in September 1571, she gave birth to her fourth child, unfortunately another girl, which, however, only lived a few months; had the wished-for heir appeared then, probably Francesco would have been too gratified to have tormented his wife any further. Though the suspicions so thoroughly aroused with regard to her husband's fidelity were never dispelled, the pair continued to live together in peace, which was doubtless more apparent than real, so long as Cosimo lived.

CHAPTER X

BIANCA'S FREEDOM

THESE events, however, had but a transitory effect on Francesco, and when Bianca came quietly back into the city he resumed his former habits, and spent every evening he could with her at her house in the Via Maggio, usually supping with her and returning home in the small hours of the morning. And this he persisted in doing, moreover, in spite of his father's repeated warnings not to venture through the streets at night alone, or attended only by a couple of servants.

Of secrecy there was no longer any question. Francesco even confided in the garrulous Benvenuto Cellini and commissioned him to execute a medallion portrait of him as a gift to his lady. Cellini had always been a friend of Cosimo's sons, who, as children, would often stand round him when he was working in the Palace upon the commissions entrusted to him by Duchess Eleonora, hindering and teasing him as children will, and always good-naturedly tolerated by the great artist. For Francesco Cellini had a special affection, his interest being aroused as much by the Prince's amorous adventures and ill-regulated life as by his genuine love and understanding for art, a combination which naturally appealed to the older, but far more vigorous and energetic man. This friendship continued until Cellini's death, and indeed after it, for he remembered Francesco in his will. Thus it was easily comprehensible that he should be made a confidant of the passion for Bianca and the one chosen to prepare for her so intimate a gift. The little portrait shows the figure of Francesco as far as the waist,

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in profile and in high relief upon a dark ground. The Prince wears a black corselet braided with gold, and a black mantle, of which he holds a fold in his left hand. Round his neck hangs the Cross of the Order of San Stefano, that order which Cosimo had founded to perpetuate the remembrance of the two victories of Montemurlo and Scannagallo and which was yet to cause difficulties with the Venetians; he wears a ruff after the Spanish fashion, and his brown hair is shaved over the ears. The face is one arrived at the prime of life, of dark complexion, but in spite of the purpose for which the picture was intended, it shows cold composure and a melancholy expression. The date of this portrait is about 1570, and a letter written in Francesco's own hand accompanied the gift:

'Beloved Bianca,—From Pisa I do herewith send you my portrait, the which Master Cellini hath made for me. And with it take likewise my heart.—D. Francesco.'

One wonders if this medallion were sent to Bianca during that very journey of reconciliation undertaken by Francesco and Giovanna, when he had expressed contrition and she had granted forgiveness for faithlessness of which this was but a fresh proof?

In the city a new crop of tales and scandals had sprung up; scurrilous jokes and verses were sung in the streets about the Regent and his mistress, for the Florentines turn everything into rhyme and ridicule, and tricks were openly played on the lady who was hated by the people as having destroyed the happiness of their beloved Regina Giovanna. Celio Malespini, the novelist, who was living in Florence at this time, a personal friend both of the Medici family and of Bianca, tells how a certain Genoese gentleman, who had recently entered Francesco's service in some capacity or other, had once occasion to pass through the Via Maggio very early in the morning, and to his surprise beheld the door of Bianca's house decorated with the horns of numerous

beasts, and heaps of refuse and rubbish of all kinds cast down before it. The good gentleman was so shocked that he turned back rather than pass in front of the house and seem to be aware of such an insult. But it was evidently no novelty and Bianca's servants were on the watch, for when the Genoese returned again an hour later there was no sign that such a horrid practical joke had ever been perpetrated.

Bianca had now become so necessary to Francesco that he threw off all mask of pretence. Her energy and decision ruled his indecision, and his sombre and melancholy nature found in her all the relief of brightness and gaiety, all the intimate companionship which he lacked at home. Giovanna's discovery of his infidelity had made the first rift in that lute which had never played true music from the beginning, and his irritation and her utter incapability of trying to fight her rival with her own weapons of gaiety and attractiveness had widened it beyond hope of repair. Like her husband, she was naturally of a dull and melancholy temperament, though in her it was largely the result of the strict education to which she had been subjected all her girlhood, an education which had taught her that worldly pleasure was vanity and personal beauty a snare. Thus all the charms of youthful impulse and innocent coquetry had been crushed in her, and even had she known how, she would have thought it wrong to employ any other means of reclaiming her husband than those of reproaches and complaints. She devoted herself exclusively to her house, her children and her religion, sought no society but that of her German attendants, and made no attempt to hide her disapproval of the morals of the Tuscan court or to take command and mend them, thus throwing away a weapon ready to her hand for the discomfiture of her rival.

But now the upstart Piero grew more and more impudent and intolerable. Instead of putting an end to his intrigue with Cassandra Bongianni after the Prince's warning, he became more brazen than before in his behaviour and even

visited her house in broad daylight, boasting of his success and mocking at her relatives whenever he met them in public. Ruberto Ricci in particular, Cassandra's nephew and one of the principal bankers of Florence, was the object of Piero's impertinent behaviour, and he at last determined to take the lead in putting an end to these unbearable insults. It was useless to persuade or threaten his aunt, for she steadily denied what was patent to all the city, and his complaints to the Regent had produced nothing more than reprimands of Piero, which were worse than useless and had only had the effect of increasing his self-confidence and offensiveness. A third way must therefore be found, and the Ricci sought the help of Donna Isabella Orsini, whose firm friends and adherents they had always been. Ruberto, as the spokesman of the family, laid their case before her and declared that he was ready to sacrifice liberty and possessions and to hesitate at nothing if only he could free the family from Piero Bonaventuri, and he prayed Isabella to speak to her brother on his behalf, seeing that his personal petition had borne no fruit. Isabella consented willingly enough to bring the Ricci's just grievance again before the Regent, and she was not one to be talked down and put off with promises as they had been. On hearing these renewed and insistent complaints, Francesco resolved to put an end to the nuisance by carrying out his former plan of sending Piero to France until he should have learnt better manners, and he immediately informed Bianca that his patience with her husband was exhausted and that Piero must leave Italy indefinitely, or risk assassination at the hands of his enraged enemies.

This ultimatum fell upon Bianca with a genuine shock. For years her life between these two men had gone on serenely, and now her lover and her husband were suddenly in collision, and for the first time she must choose her side with one or the other. To oppose the Prince was unthinkable; it meant the instant crashing down about her ears of that fair house of prosperity she had erected with such

pains upon a foundation she knew to be as unstable as shifting sand. She was wholly dependent on Francesco, and she knew that in his present mood there could be no trifling with him; she was too clever ever to run risks of that kind. But, in spite of their common shame and mutual infidelity, somewhere deep down in her heart there still lay dormant a spark of her first love for the handsome Piero. And when she was suddenly confronted with the possibility of losing him altogether, she was startled for once out of her self-control and violently opposed the suggested separation; she guessed too well it meant death for the exile, that death for which she had longed when, in his early wooing, Francesco had promised her marriage if ever they should both become free, but which now in its imminence seemed a thing too horrid to contemplate.

It was seldom the Prince came to her in mood so determined as this; never before had he issued orders concerning her affairs about which he had not consulted her first. And now, as she read the stubborn anger in his face, for the first time Bianca seemed to realise her true position, to see Francesco with different eyes. He was not the lover only, he was an angry master who could dispose of her and hers as he chose, and she knew that if Piero were to be saved she alone could do it. And in that moment she wanted to save him, unreasoningly, desperately she wanted to save him, and with him to save herself from an intolerable horror and remorse which even in imagination she could not bear.

If Francesco would renounce the idea of sending Piero to France, she said, she herself would undertake to reason with him; only delay the order for his journey and she would guarantee to make him behave himself; she had better arguments than any one for convincing him that it would be more profitable to remain in the Prince's good graces, and to give up his intrigue with Cassandra, than to persevere in his offences. But Bianca had not known how

hard it could be to move Francesco when once his mind was fixed; he could feel her tears upon his cheek, her kisses on his lips, her soft body pressed to his, and yet forbear to speak the words she craved to hear. She was not fighting for Piero's life alone, but for her own future peace of mind, and she had no time to reflect. Just when, at last, by means of tears and promises, she had persuaded Francesco to leave the matter in her hands, and they were still together there, they heard Piero come home. And full of one idea only, Bianca determined to speak to him then and there, trusting to that power which had never yet failed her, and had even now in that moment worked on his behalf, to regain even temporarily her former influence over her husband. Piero's apartments were situated on the ground floor and had a small private entrance at the side of the house, opening into a narrow alley connecting the Via Maggio with the Piazza Santo Spirito. Inside, a small staircase leading up from Piero's rooms communicated with those occupied by Bianca on the floor immediately above. Waiting till she knew his servants had left him, she descended the private stairs and entered his chamber, Francesco following, unperceived by her, to a little closet in the wall whence he could overhear the interview. Perhaps he was curious to know how the other man would be overcome in his turn.

Bianca's visits to her husband's room were rare events, and he stared in surprise when she appeared at that hour of the night. And still more was he amazed at her wet eyes and disturbed countenance as she stretched out her hands towards him with an unwonted caress, for her professions of love for him had long since been things of the past.

'Thou knowest that thou art still dear to me, Piero,' she began, 'and thou must listen to me patiently, for I have to speak of matters of the gravest import both for thine advantage and thy safety.'

And quickly she told him of the fresh complaints and of the Prince's anger and resolve to send him into France to

escape the daggers of the Ricci, and she implored him to give up Cassandra once for all and not thus imperil his life and make her wretched.

Bianca's words rang true and her agitation was real; never, perhaps, since she had passed through the Porta San Gallo that December night nine years ago had Piero's interests been paramount with her until now, and her anxiety for him was keen. But he did not believe her; he thought that she was only acting as Francesco's mouthpiece and trying to get him away to France. He fell into a furious rage and thrust her from him without even letting her finish what she was trying to say. If for no other reason but to spite his enemies the Ricci and the Prince himself, Piero swore he would not leave Cassandra, let Francesco do and say what he liked. And then he turned his uncontrollable anger upon his wife, through whom alone he had gained prosperity and power, and threatened her as she stood helpless before him.

'And thou, thou ——!' he cried, using the vilest terms in the Tuscan tongue, 'say but another word and I will cut thy throat, as thou well deservest for thy sins! And mistake me not, for assuredly will I do it yet, as I will also cut off those golden horns which thou hast planted upon my head!' And with that he flung out of the room and left her.

So unexpected had been the result of Bianca's well-meant interview with her husband, so great the shock at discovering how completely she had lost all influence over him, that on regaining her own room, she knew not how, she fell into a torrent of weeping that nothing could restrain. All the tears she should ever have shed for the life she was leading seemed to burst forth now, and when Francesco followed her upstairs he could do nothing to check her bitter sobs and cries.

If Bianca had seemed to see a strange Francesco, so surely now he saw a Bianca he had not known before, a Bianca prone and crying for another man, and one who stood in his, Francesco's, way. He did not know how the strongest

woman can break down unexpectedly and in spite of herself, and the sight hardened his stubborn will again. He had promised to issue no order against Piero and that promise he would keep. That was all. But before all things Bianca must be pacified, and he applied himself to the task.

'Let him go his own way,' he said at length, 'and the evil be upon his own head. And do not torment yourself so greatly, for ye can do nothing more; let the stream flow its course, for if ye do seek to stem it ye will yourself be drowned. Piero is headstrong and refuseth to be saved, wherefore must we now leave him to his fate.'

And Piero, senseless with rage, was rushing on his fate like the stream to which Francesco had compared him.

Still seething with anger after his scene with his wife, and hotly resenting the interference which he guessed had been instigated by the Prince, Bonaventuri was walking through the city next morning when, by the column in the Piazza Santa Trinità, he came upon Ruberto Ricci talking with two Florentine gentlemen. He instantly drew his pistol and, placing it against Ricci's breast, he cried:

'Thou wretch and evil-speaker, I know not what hindereth me from shooting thee through the heart! But if ever I hear again that thou hast said the least word of me unto the Prince, then mayest thou hold thyself as a man already dead!'

Too astonished to make instant reply, and being, moreover, wholly unarmed, the unfortunate Ricci stood like a stone, staring at the insolent Piero as he continued his walk; then he turned and went immediately to the Prince to demand revenge for the public insult.

Accompanied by the two friends who had been witnesses of the scene in the Piazza Santa Trinità, Ruberto Ricci found Francesco, as usual of a morning, in his chemical laboratory on the upper floor of the Uffizi Palace, where he was in the habit of granting audience to his intimates whilst superintending his assistants at their work. Having heard

the complaint, Francesco suddenly determined to let the Ricci do the deed he longed to do himself but dared not; the chance of such a catspaw was too good to be lost. So he drew Ruberto out on to the terrace (now the closed-in corridor of the picture-gallery, but then an open loggia), and they paced to and fro for a long time in earnest talk. The conversation was secret between the two, and when Ruberto took his leave Francesco said, 'Do what ye deem best, I desire to know naught of the matter.' And that very evening the Prince rode out to spend a couple of days at his new villa of Pratolino.

By absenting himself in this beautiful country place, Francesco hoped to escape any suspicion of complicity in the dark deed about to be committed. The visit could not be looked upon as unusual, seeing that he very frequently rode out to discuss with Bernardo Buontalenti the plans for the palace he was building there in the midst of exquisite gardens. Now, with the memory of Bianca's tears fresh in his mind, he availed himself of the opportunity to get out of a difficulty. The man who, to suit his own private ends, he had raised from nothing over the heads of the first nobles of Florence, had become an intolerable nuisance and a danger. And the danger was ever on the increase. The Florentines had shown open discontent at Duke Cosimo's freedom with their women, and the discontent had not been lessened by Francesco's own early escapades; if now he allowed one of his favourites to offend in a similar manner unpunished, the murmurings against the reigning family were likely to develop into ugly deeds. Francesco's hands were so tied that he could not strike at Piero openly, nor dare he disregard any longer the complaints of the powerful Ricci, and Bianca had upset the only plan which seemed possible. Between his private comfort as represented by her and public opinion as represented by the Ricci, the obstinate though weak-minded Prince was on the horns of a dilemma, and ended by doing what many a feeble ruler has done before and since—he abandoned his dangerous

favourite to the vengeance of his enemies and washed his hands of all responsibility.

Bianca was now such a dominant factor in Francesco's happiness, in his very existence almost, that he grudged every moment spent away from her. The scene in the Bonaventuri's house, of which he had been a hidden witness, gave little promise of a peaceful future if the furious Piero were still left at liberty. He had not to go far back amongst his own kinsmen to find a case analogous to his own, for Alessandro de' Medici, his father's predecessor on the throne of Florence, had met a violent end on account of a woman. Whether Francesco had reason to fear a similar fate or not, the opportunity of getting rid of Bonaventuri without being nominally responsible for his removal was too good not to be seized with both hands.

The way for their revenge being now clear, the Ricci resolved to lose no time in carrying it out. The interview with the Prince took place on the morning of the 26th August 1572, and on leaving the Uffizi, Ruberto Ricci returned to the house of Donna Isabella Orsini to complete the final arrangements for the tragedy of the coming night. This lady had lent her willing aid throughout the whole business, perhaps in hatred of Piero, who had not respected even his master's sister, perhaps to liberate her brother from the worry to which he was daily subjected. Her house was the meeting-place of the conspirators, and she had already procured them accomplices on the chance of their being able to carry out their designs. Her husband, Paolo Giordano, informed of the matter, had sent several experienced bravos from Rome, men used to all kinds of dark work, who were hidden in her palace until their services should be needed. But Ruberto would cede to nobody the privilege of dealing the death-blow, and he took with him as his companion Messer Celio Malespini, as expert with the sword as he was with the pen, and who has left the most detailed account of what he himself saw done. These, with some fiery youths of

Isabella's own household, made up the party, twelve in all.

The Ricci knew that in his present defiant temper Piero was not likely to miss his accustomed visit to their young aunt, and that he usually remained at her house until just before dawn. It was therefore arranged that the avengers should be distributed at different points along the streets which led from Cassandra's house in the Borgo Santi Apostoli to Piero's in the Via Maggio, the strongest force being on the further side of the Arno, where it was intended the murder should be done. So that whichever way the victim returned home he would be caught, and one of the youths was posted on the Santa Trinità bridge, over which Piero would be obliged to pass, to give warning by a pre-arranged signal of his approach.

When night fell, the night between the 26th and 27th of August, the party, armed and cloaked, met in the Duchess's house and thence departed at midnight each to his appointed place, there to wait with ears and eyes on the alert until the signal should be given which showed that the bird was caught in the net.

The time of waiting was long, for it lacked but an hour of daybreak when Piero left the Bongianni house and, followed by a single servant, approached the bridge on his way home. Then suddenly through the darkness came a whistle and the cry 'Allò! allò!' a call much in use then by Florentine youths but strange and unwonted at that early hour of the morning; and it was instantly answered by another whistle from beyond the river, as it seemed. Although he never imagined that these signals concerned himself, Piero took the precaution as he mounted the bridge of having his pistol ready in one hand and his drawn sword in the other; unusual sounds at night often betokened danger even to passers-by. He crossed the bridge, paying no attention to two cloaked figures loitering at the corner of the Via Maggio, up which he would have had to pass had he been making for the main entrance to his house; but taking instead the Via

Santo Spirito, he turned up a narrow alley on the left in which was situated the private door to his own apartments, the key of which he always carried with him. And here suddenly he realised that the strange calls had concerned him and that he had run straight into an ambush, for the lane was barred by four other figures who instantly set upon him and were joined by the first two. His servant was wounded directly and bidden by the murderers to flee for his life, which he promptly did; but Piero, no coward physically whatever he was morally, fought desperately against these overwhelming odds, and not only wounded two of his aggressors but managed to fight his way almost to his own door. But then came all the twelve upon him together and Ricci cried, 'Kill the traitor! Kill!' On hearing his enemy's voice Piero flung down his sword, for he had no space to wield it, so closely did they press upon him in that narrow lane, and fired and missed Ricci, and as he drew a second pistol from his pocket Malespini cut him down by a thrust under the knee. Then Ricci sprang forward, thinking to kill him outright, but Piero had his short dagger and struck him with such force that his helmet was split and he was severely wounded in the head. And instantly they were all upon Piero with blows, so that his brains bespattered the wall of his own house, and then, as swiftly as they had come, the assassins fled, leaving their prey upon the ground pierced by more than five-and-twenty mortal wounds.

Not far from the scene of the struggle was the shop of an apothecary, who had heard the clash of arms and cries of fighting men, and when sudden silence succeeded to the uproar he crept out with his two apprentices, and in the dim light of dawn found Piero lying before his own door and covered with blood from head to foot. Finding he was still breathing faintly, the apothecary sent his lads in haste for lights, and when they were brought he recognised who it was,—but Piero died even in that moment, even as his own door opened and his servants peered out to learn the cause of the disturbance which had waked the whole household rom its sleep. Up went their cry to Bianca, startled at she

Photo Brogi

THE PIAZZA FRESCOBALDI AND SANTA TRINITÀ BRIDGE

The corner where the assassins waited for Piero

From a contemporary fresco in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence

knew not what, and brought her rushing down in her night clothes into the dim street, where lay the first and perhaps the only man she had ever really loved, short though the reality of that love had been; and at the sight she lost all control over herself, so that her shrieks brought the neighbours running out of their houses and all the quarter was awake. The body of Piero was carried to the church of San Jacopo near by, and the frenzied Bianca was taken back to her apartments and surrounded by neighbours, kindly or curious women who crowded into the disorganised house and tried in vain to console the favourite at whom they would have spat an hour before. But Bianca was beside herself and paid no heed to the intruders; grief, remorse and rage made her blind to outward things. She tore her hair and face and cried for vengeance to the Prince, threatening to kill herself for her failure to prevent the deed. But Francesco was away, of course. He returned to the city immediately he received the news of the murder from Isabella and went straight to Bianca and tried to calm her, promising by all he held sacred that the murderers should be captured before another day had passed. But, till her frenzy was spent and her strength exhausted, she would listen to nothing even from him, except remorse and vengeance, vengeance and remorse.

Poor Ser Zanobi's forebodings had been only too well founded; during his son's prosperity he had asked nothing of him, but now he was left to do all that remained to be done for him on earth. The day after the death the poor old man fetched away the body and buried it in the family tomb in the church of San Niccolò.

Thus died Piero Bonaventuri and Bianca was free. But with this murder the vengeance of the Ricci was not complete. The very night after her lover had met his fate two masked men silently entered Cassandra's house, and, calling her from the room where she was sleeping with her little son, they drove a dagger into her throat as she stood upon the threshold. Thus did her family wash its honour clean from the stain these two had put upon it.

CHAPTER XI

AT THE CROSS-ROADS

When they fled from the scene of the murder, Ruberto de' Ricci and his band had immediately taken refuge in the house of the Duchess of Bracciano. The spies of the *Signori Otto* were speedily on their track, but they could not enter Isabella's palace and there make arrests without a special order, and the Prince, in spite of his first loud expressions of indignation, absolutely moved not a step in the matter of punishing the culprits. He even allowed several days to elapse before issuing orders for their arrest, and his dilatoriness betrayed beyond any doubt his real intention of letting the assassins escape.

So the hired bravos received their pay and were dismissed; Isabella's own followers, who had taken part in the night's work, moved to Rome for a time and then returned quietly to Florence, and Malespini succeeded in eluding even the least suspicion of having been concerned in the affair. Ruberto had been badly wounded in the head by his victim and lay hidden for three weeks in the Orsini palace before he was fit to make his escape. Then he went to Venice, whence he addressed a petition to the Grand Duke and the Prince, setting forth the reasons which had led him to commit the two murders, the dishonourable conduct of his aunt Cassandra and the intolerable boastings and insults of Piero. He prayed that the sentence passed on him of death, or exile and confiscation of property, might be cancelled, and he be regarded as not having committed the crime without having to appear before the judges, promising in return

to devote the rest of his life to the service of the princes. And the petition was granted without delay; Francesco wrote upon it with his own hand that this was the Grand Duke's will and signed it *Ita est Franciscus.*

What could the Eight do in the face of this?

Ruberto Ricci, however, did not long enjoy his immunity from arrest. The wound inflicted by the dying Piero had caused permanent injury, and though he recovered for a time he fell ill again, and four years later he died from the results of that dark night's work.

It was an open secret, confirmed by his actions, that Francesco's measures against the Ricci were not undertaken in earnest, but that he had known beforehand of the murder, and had gone away to Pratolino on purpose to leave the coast clear and not be himself implicated in the affair. Thus he acted contrary to his duty as reigning prince in absenting himself from the city at a moment when his presence might have prevented a crime.

But if Francesco was dilatory in pursuing Piero's murderers, he was certainly prompt enough in securing the comfort and independence of Piero's widow. According to the law relating to the guardianship of minors brought into force by Cosimo in 1565, the *Magistrato* had the legal guardianship of all orphans under the age of eighteen who were not otherwise provided for by will; in such cases six months were allowed in which the grandfather, mother, paternal uncle, brother or first cousin had to decide which of them would assume charge of the minor. All other guardianship was then cancelled. Immediately after his son's death Ser Zanobi presented himself before the *Magistrato* to assume the guardianship of his granddaughter Pellegrina, declaring her legitimate heiress of all her father's property, which property, however, consisted entirely of gifts made by the Prince to Bianca. But Francesco had already tied the hands of any guardian. On the very day after Piero's death, he had a document drawn up in Bianca's name by an

expert lawyer; in this she was made to pray the Prince to declare her case a special one, inasmuch as all she was supposed to possess in common with her husband was in reality her own, bought with money exclusively hers, and that consequently the Bonaventuri had no shadow of right over any of the property. To this document Francesco added with his own hand a declaration that he knew these facts to be true; that all the property was Bianca's to dispose of as she liked, and that by his, the Prince's, orders she was to be exempted from all laws relating to the property of deceased persons, and was not obliged to disburse one cent either to Piero's family or as death duties. This precious safeguard for his friend's interests was signed by Francesco de' Medici, Prince of Tuscany, and the signature was witnessed by Lelio Torelli, the Prince's own secretary in all legal matters. Francesco had no idea of letting any of his own gifts to Bianca fall into the hands of the Bonaventuri! So when old Ser Zanobi presented himself to take charge of his grandchild, this document was placed before him and he was forced to submit to the will of the Regent. And although, for the due outward observance of the law, he was appointed guardian of his granddaughter so long as she remained a minor and unmarried, he was forced to sign an agreement by which he bound himself to allow her to reside with her mother and to give that mother entire control and charge of her child, even in the event of her marrying again or returning to live in Venice, and never to interfere with her or her heirs either legally or privately. And the old man had to submit, although consumed with rage against his daughter-in-law, whom he considered mainly responsible for his son's fate, and trembling with foreboding for Pellegrina's future if left to the care of such a mother, forebodings only too well justified by her subsequent history.

During the enforced seclusion of her early widowhood what may Bianca's thoughts have been? What surging up of memories and traditions? What alternate reawakening and

stifling of conscience and rectitude? She had reached a crisis in her life, a parting of the ways, when a will stronger than her own strong will, now temporarily weakened, a hand held out in honest friendship, might have led her upward again as easily as she had sunk down. Shut up in her darkened house, Bianca's thoughts turned instinctively to her own people, and a craving seized her for the natural ties of blood and kinship and the sights and the sea of her native place. The narrow, noisy Via Maggio with its ceaseless traffic pouring to and from the Roman Gate, the yellow Arno which flowed at the end of the street and waxed and waned with rain or drought, seemed unbearable when she remembered the wide lagoons and still waterways of Venice. But in Venice was the step-mother, the vindictive, and with the remembrance of her came back thoughts of how her own nearest kindred had behaved, and doubts as to how she would be received by them even now; whilst here in Florence was the Prince and all that his protection implied for her. But Bianca was too clear-sighted not to realise how precarious in reality her position now was. She might affect to despise the hostility of the people, but if once she lost her hold over Francesco, the popular feeling against her would make instant flight from Florence wellnigh imperative, and she knew her Prince's character too well to trust solely to his vows of eternal fidelity. So far she had prospered and fortune had flung her high, but the next turn of the wheel might throw her down again, and she must have some safe place whereon her feet might rest.

The first step in reopening communication with her family was not, however, for Bianca herself to make. When the Cappellos had seen that Bianca and Piero were living in easy circumstances and in favour at court, they had soon ceased from troubling and had apparently taken no further notice of the former fugitives; but as a matter of fact they kept themselves very well informed, especially on the subject of Bianca's financial position. Now, when they heard that Piero had been murdered without any trouble on

their part, leaving Bianca a wealthy widow, they immediately demanded that she should return to her own family in Venice.

The characters of Bartolommeo and Vettore Cappello had not improved with time. The injury they considered Bianca had done them still rankled, but the nature of the grievance had changed. It was not their wounded honour they thought of now, but of their light pockets and Bianca's heavy ones, and though they knew the source whence she had derived her fortune, it was no drawback in their covetous eyes. She must be lured back to Venice, to the convent which had waited for her so long in vain, and her father and brother would take possession of the fortune for which she had paid so dear.

But the Cappello family was not unanimous on this point. Those cousins, Andrea and Girolamo, who had been her friends throughout, urged that she should indeed be brought back to Venice, but that a second marriage should be speedily arranged for her in her native city. In any case, however, back to Venice she must come, and Andrea, the younger of the two cousins, was deputed to break the ice for the family and open negotiations with the young widow. That Andrea's intentions were honest enough, and that he was no party to Bartolommeo's designs on his daughter's money, seems pretty clear, for Bianca trusted him as she trusted none other of her family, and she was not easy to deceive. So he wrote and told her how her grief had melted her father's heart, and that now he would willingly overlook all the past and open his arms to her again; how she must come back to Venice, where a second and a happier marriage would soon wipe out all remembrance of the tragedy of her first experience.

But Bianca could read between the lines of this cousinly epistle, if the writer himself could not; she understood her father's sudden solicitude for her welfare and how large a part her fortune played in his paternal affection. The events of the past year had been a greater strain on her than any one guessed; the open rupture with the Archduchess and her scorn and enmity, the gibes of the Florentines and Francesco's discontent, and then the horror of Piero's death,

had forced her to face the truth of her position. Instinctively she longed for reconciliation with her father; but now that the chance had come, the longing was mingled with distrust of both father and brother and fear of the fate they had prepared for her. Andrea was honest and he spoke of an honourable life for her in Venice, but perhaps neither he nor she knew at what cost it would be bought. This letter gave her food for thought, for all her future and the fate of her little Pellegrina depended on the decision she might make now, when she stood, as it were, at the cross-roads of her life. Bianca was not wont to seek advice, but now she needed a friend; and in Isabella Orsini, Francesco's sister, she found a shrewd adviser, for Isabella's own interests were more closely concerned with Bianca's decision than the latter guessed.

Bianca's tact and cleverness had never been better displayed than in her dealings with Francesco's family. Her position with the Archduchess Giovanna was, indeed, hopelessly compromised, but with her lover's brothers and sister she had contrived to keep on terms which were more or less cordial. She and the Duchess of Bracciano, the two most brilliant women at that brilliant court, had been mutually attracted by each other, and since Bianca had gone to live in the Via Maggio a great friendship had sprung up between them. But Isabella's interest in Bianca's affairs was not a purely disinterested one. Utterly neglected by her husband, the infamous Paolo Giordano, and openly insulted by his infidelity with the beautiful but notorious Vittoria Accoramboni, she had repaid him by bestowing her love on his nephew, Troilo Orsini; and in Bianca she had found a helper and confidante, whilst her protection was of immense value to the stranger playing a game even more dangerous than her own. It was a friendship profitable to both sides, and Bianca had eagerly responded to Isabella's advances: the Prince's sister was perhaps the closest woman friend she ever possessed, yet even here the instinct of caution and self-preservation had placed a check upon her lips and a limit to her confidences. And her friend knew it.

But now the hidden wall of self-defence was left unguarded. The sultry autumn weeks that followed Piero's murder were a time of strain and nervous tension that weakened even Bianca's self-reliance. It was the hottest time of the year in Florence, when all who could escaped to the surrounding hills, where the heat was tempered by breezes from the Apennines and the eye could rest on the dark woods that clothed the neighbouring slopes, on the green mass of Vallombrosa or the distant peaks of Carrara rising sharp against the cloudless sky. But in the city doors and windows must be closed all day to keep out the stifling air and opened only when the cool of evening brought some slight relief, and the tall house in the Via Maggio which Buontalenti's hand had so cunningly decorated and Francesco's adoration had so sumptuously furnished, was a very prison to Bianca, sitting there day after day, robed in the heavy black draperies which made her bright beauty seem all the fairer. The custom of those times required that a widow should be practically immured within her own house during the first period of her mourning, and as a plant shut up in a cellar turns to the one ray of light that penetrates its darkness, so Bianca welcomed the daily visits of the astute Isabella. She knew how to take advantage of the situation and win Bianca's whole confidence, and had soon divined those secret hopes of becoming Francesco's wife in the event of Giovanna's death, hopes which Bianca herself had perhaps scarcely acknowledged, but which the alternative proposed in Andrea's letter had suddenly made present and vivid. Giovanna's failing health made this marriage a not impossible consideration for the near future, and both Isabella and the Cardinal held it to be a calamity which must be averted at any cost.

Of all Cosimo's children Isabella and Ferdinando had always been the closest friends, somewhat to the exclusion of the elder brother; but now that their father's retirement and semi-paralysis had made Francesco practically ruler of the family, of necessity he entered into their reckonings

more than hitherto. They both had their own games to play; but whilst Isabella, poor soul, plotted for her own self-preservation, Ferdinando's was an honest game in the interests of the family and the state.

The Cardinal knew and disapproved strongly of the relations existing between his brother and Bianca. It was not the moral aspect of the affair which shocked him, however; he was a man of the world, a man of his time, and, above all, a Medici, but he was jealous for the reputation of his house and it galled his pride that both at home and abroad Francesco should be an object of jest and contempt. Moreover, like his father, Ferdinando was warmly attached to his sister-in-law, and her wrongs and grief touched him deeply. During his absence in Rome Isabella kept him fully informed of all that went on in Florence, especially of the doings of Francesco and Bianca. They both recognised her attraction and her power, but they could take no steps openly against her, and could only work in secret to procure her voluntary departure from Florence. This conspiracy, innocent as was its object, must be conducted with the utmost discretion, for if Francesco were only to suspect that they were aiming to deprive him of Bianca, they would assuredly not only fail in their endeavour but would incur the full measure of his anger and revenge. And this was what neither the Cardinal nor his sister cared to do: Ferdinando's income was by no means equal to his expenditure and he hoped to obtain further supplies from his brother, and Isabella's own private and domestic affairs were approaching a crisis wherein she knew that only Francesco's protection and authority could save her from disaster or even worse.

It was clear to Isabella that Andrea's suggestion of a second and speedy marriage for Bianca was the one and only solution of the difficulty, and moreover, she must be safely married before she left Florence. If she went away with a husband and of her own free will, Francesco would have no right to object or to detain her, but if she were to be lured to Venice unmarried and put in a convent, Francesco's

rage would know no bounds, and his own family would instantly be accused of conniving at preparing the trap for her. Bianca must be made to see the matter in its right light, and the Duchess would know how to use her authority as well as her friendship to ensure her doing so.

Bartolommeo and Vettore laid crafty plans to capture Bianca and her fortune, but they were not careful in the execution of them. In reply to their letters she had shown herself disposed to agree to their wishes, without, however, making any promises. The wily Bartolommeo believed in striking while the iron was hot and thereupon despatched to Florence a certain trusty lawyer named Gardellino, who was to persuade Bianca to return without delay. His chief errand, however, though not his ostensible one, was to obtain control of her wealth and to convert as much of it as possible into hard cash, to be immediately forwarded to Venice to replenish the coffers of her father and brother. Isabella, ever alert, was well informed of these instructions and lost no time in putting the intended victim on her guard. It happened that there had been a fire at the palace in the Via Larga and Isabella had taken refuge in a friend's house, where she could not send for Bianca to visit her. But although the fright and fatigue she had undergone compelled her to keep her bed, the urgency of the matter made her write a letter the very next morning.

'Much honoured sister,' she called Bianca, 'I am much upset by the great fire in which I was last night, and I cannot speak with you as I do desire and as I should do if I were in mine own house, for then I should send a closed carriage to fetch you and should tell you at great length by word of mouth that which I shall now write you in a few lines. Ye know that I do love you much more than a sister, and shall never counsel you unto aught that is not for your advantage and your honour. It hath been told me that your father hath sent hither one with the intention of taking you back to Venice. I must remind you of the small esteem in which he hath held you these eight years

past, and how he did cause all to marvel at his strange proceedings, seeking to possess himself of what was yours; and how, in short, ye found no pity in him who gave you being for an error committed rather through the fault of others than through your own. Now consider if it would be well to place yourself in his hands and how ye would be treated. I do remind you as a loving sister that here ye are mistress of your own house and that there ye would perforce be subject unto a father who, judging by all that hath passed, loveth you but little, and unto a brother who hath small affection for you, and unto a sister-in-law, so that ye would have but little satisfaction from your resolve. Think well upon the matter, and consider that all I say unto you I do say because I do love you. And remember that I did swear to be a sister unto you and ye did promise me never to determine upon aught without first telling me; therefore remember this. And if I could have speech with you I would prove unto you that your father's sending for you is more ceremony than paternal love, because if it were paternal love ye would have known of it before this. And now, because I am not well, I must make an end of this writing. I love you as well as it is possible to love any person, and I do remind you and exhort you to abide by my counsels, which ye will find profitable for you and spoken in true affection, as I will tell you by word of mouth when I am able. May God content you and open the eyes of your mind to do that which is best for you, which will be to remain where you are adored, which is here, without seeking another place.

'From my bed, on the 24th September [1572].

'Your loving sister,

'Donna Isabella Medici Orsini.

'*P.S.*—Do not let yourself be persuaded, for ye would come to repent of it; it would profit you little, and ye would suffer and I should grieve. Wherefore believe her who loveth you as herself.'

This letter certainly reads as though Isabella's affection for her friend was genuine, (and it may well have been so, for Bianca could inspire devotion when she chose,) and she knew fairly accurately what would be the fate of the former fugitive from Venice if she returned there into the midst of a hostile family without the protection of a husband. It was fortunate for Isabella that in this case the same mode of action would best serve both her friend's interests and her own, and that she could thus advise her with a clear conscience.

Gardellino was received by Bianca and duly repeated Bartolommeo's paternal exhortations; but, though she accorded him fine words and great courtesy, he departed empty-handed of everything else. Early in the new year Andrea wrote again and informed Bianca that Bartolommeo had authorised Bon, an old friend of the family, to arrange a suitable marriage for her in Venice; but at the same time she received a letter from one Francesco Mori, saying that her father particularly wished her to find a second husband in Tuscany. She perceived clearly that no reliance was to be placed in her father's words and that, whatever he might propose for her supposed welfare, there was some kind of double-dealing behind which even honest Andrea could not understand. So she shrank back at once and only answered her cousin:

'Most magnificent and honoured brother (cousins were looked upon almost as brothers), I have seen the good offices which you, my dearest brother, have undertaken with my father, for the which I do thank you to the utmost of my power. And I do know that from you there will come unto me nothing save what is pleasant, such as I have always hoped for from you. I do assure you that I did greatly admire the answer which ye did make unto mine honoured father, for most certainly such words as ye did speak unto him do but little agree with the letters which he writeth unto me! True it is that none can know the

Photo Alinari

BIANCA CAPPELLO AS A YOUNG WOMAN
From a portrait by Allori, in the Uffizi Gallery

truth about men, but I do put my trust in God and He will do with me what is best.

'That which my father told you, that I had written unto him saying that I did possess thirty thousand scudi in estates and real property, is true. Also am I free to go away whenever I do desire, with the permission of the Duchess Isabella; but naturally it is understood that I should leave a part of my possessions for my daughter, as is right and proper, that she may be married honourably as beseemeth my daughter. But I will speak no more of this lest I should weary your lordship. I do only pray you, together with your lady consort, that ye will command me in anything, for I have no desire but to serve you.

'I cannot write unto mine honoured father more clearly than I have already done, and if he desireth to understand me he can well do so. I will write no more now, for being in a hot church with the Lady Isabella upon the day of Epiphany and going forth into a cold wind, I did take cold in mine head; I hope it will be nothing worse. Angioletto del Venier is arrived here with a letter from you, the which I know your lordship hath written to please him, and I will not fail to help him in whatsoever I can for the sake of his father. Pellegrina and I kiss the hands of your lordship and your lady, praying God ever to keep you happy and content.

'Written from Florence on the 9th January 1573.

'Your lordship's cousin and sister and servant,

'Bianca Cappello.'

Bianca was very anxious that all these discussions as to her future should be kept secret from Isabella, for she feared that lady would take offence at anything so important having been discussed behind her back. She feared Isabella's affection would put a hindrance in the way of her leaving Florence, but she need have been under no apprehension on that score.

Henceforth Bianca was in no further uncertainty as to

whom she might safely trust; she knew her father and brother too well by this time. On the 28th March 1573 she wrote again to Andrea, thanking him for his honest endeavours to promote her welfare and wishing her nearer relatives would be more like him. If they really meant her to be married, she said, her brother or Andrea himself must come with the intended husband personally to Florence and fetch her, for only so and in no other way would she risk leaving her present home for Venice.

'It would be a serious matter for me and very ill-advised if I were to leave a place where I am so greatly beloved and honoured, as though I were a queen, not only by her Highness the Princess (alas for Bianca's veracity, by this time Giovanna hardly deigned to give her even in public the greetings required by etiquette and courtesy!) and the Lady Donna Isabella, mine especial patroness, but likewise by all the chief gentlemen and ladies of this city, though not because of my merit but of their kindness; and where, moreover, I have possessions and am able to live honourably as a gentlewoman. And I should be forced to leave all these things, and most especially my daughter, to go to a place where I know not what my life would be. Even so, if it were only a question of falling again into the hands of my father or my brother, I could perchance bring myself to do it; but considering that I should be returning into the hands of one who did never love me and who perchance was the cause of all mine ill-fortune and my ruin, doth your lordship think that I could ever consent thereto! Nor do I believe that any person who did wish me well would ever counsel me to return thus.

'Now have I shown you all my mind, and unless my father or my brother do come hither to fetch me, I will never leave this place. For I should hazard my life too greatly, and from being mistress, served and loved as I have already said, I should become the servant of her whom ye do know, and perchance she would cause me to perish both soul and body, for I should be in despair. Moreover, even though I should wish

to depart without being married, the Lady Isabella my mistress would in nowise permit it, for she would fear that I should in some manner come to harm. But if I were married she would be content, albeit she would grieve greatly at parting with me, for she loveth me like a sister. And this not because of my merit, but of her courtesy, and there pass not two days but that we do see each other.'

With all her astuteness Bianca never guessed that it was her dear friend's dearest wish to see her safely out of Florence, or suspected the secret understanding with Ferdinando. Indeed, Isabella had wished her to marry a distant kinsman of her husband's, a man with an income of four thousand scudi a year, but the match for some reason fell through. Isabella herself was in such difficulties now that she hardly knew which way to turn; she went in fear of her life lest her husband's anger should break out against her (there was one law for man and another for woman in such matters), and in her eldest brother's protection lay her only hope of rescue. Wherefore the business of Bianca's removal from Florence must be conducted with the utmost secrecy. And in this threefold duel between the brothers and sister over this one woman, who knows whether Francesco was as unconscious of the plot against him as the others supposed? Isabella had once been his favourite sister, yet he failed to save her from Paolo's vengeance, and his behaviour at the time of her murder certainly looked as though he had discovered her attempts to get Bianca married and out of his reach.

All through the summer the correspondence continued, and though Bianca longed to visit Venice again, she was quite determined to adhere to her decision on the marriage question. At last Andrea himself came to share her view of the situation, advising her not to leave Florence unless safely married; and he warned her, moreover, not to place any confidence in any Venetians who might visit her, for certain nobles had, on their return from Florence, been filling Venice with lies and scandal about her.

CHAPTER XII

MISTRESS AND WIFE

During the negotiations with her family for a second marriage and the uncertainty of her future plans, Bianca had withdrawn from the public notice as far as possible and behaved with great circumspection in her relations to the Prince. Giovanna, in whom the wish was certainly father to the thought, was gradually led to believe that Piero's tragic death had had a chastening effect on his widow and that Francesco's visits to her had wellnigh ceased, and she had consented to receive Bianca on certain state occasions with the other ladies of the court. What this concession cost Giovanna she alone knew, for she was never able to accept the inevitable, as so many princesses before her and since have been forced to do, and maintain her supremacy by sheer pride of position. Whenever Francesco showed signs of returning to her she was always ready to meet him more than half way (wherein she betrayed how little she understood the man with whom she had to deal), and to overlook the past for the sake of the future.

In April of this year 1573 Giovanna had undertaken a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Madonna at Loreto, in the desperate hope of obtaining the longed-for heir. In the previous November she had given birth to her fifth child, a girl like all the others, and the fresh disappointment had yet further widened the breach between her and Francesco. If prayers and supplications and handsome gifts to the altars of the saints (in this case it was six great silver candlesticks) could have brought Giovanna the boy with whose advent she believed she would regain the affection she had never

really possessed, he would have come years before, but so far even this votive journey to Loreto seemed to have been of no avail. Unfortunately neither her virtues nor her affection for himself compensated in Francesco's eyes for her lack of personal beauty, her prim manner and her strict views, which caused him so much annoyance and interfered with his pleasures. After every fresh scene of reproaches and complaints he immediately took refuge with Bianca, in whose society he found all that he missed in his wife's, and there regained his temper and self-possession; for her beauty, her gift of pleasing, her infinite charm and resource made it impossible to be ill-humoured in her presence if she willed otherwise.

Now that Bianca had determined to remain in Florence, and the Prince's continued visits and the friendship with his sister made it evident that the unpleasant story of Piero's death had not injured her position with Francesco, the courtiers followed their master's example and gathered round her with outward respect and time-serving flattery. It was in her honour that the most splendid entertainments were organised, to her that the greatest attention was paid, whilst Giovanna was neglected as far as etiquette and strict duty would allow. The favourite was considered all-powerful, for the Prince's infatuation for her had now reached that point when to see her and speak to her was his principal object in life, and he neither knew nor cared how ridiculous or pitiful he appeared in the eyes of the world. His slavery was the subject of open comment, and even casual strangers in Florence were immediately made aware of the curious state of affairs. Wherever Bianca went Francesco followed her. He never left the palace in the morning until he knew she was dressed, and he kept his attendants waiting till he found out at which church she intended to hear mass; and thither he also betook himself, exchanging with her smiles and greetings and long looks like any young lovers, quite undeterred by the presence of the unhappy Archduchess, to whom he would sometimes

barely raise his cap. After mass, at which Bianca and her daughter were provided with cushions like princesses, she would walk in the streets accompanied by some friend, and Francesco would promenade about too, only that he might have the opportunity of meeting her again and perhaps escorting her part of the way home. If she failed to appear at some function or other where she had been expected, the Prince would invent an excuse to absent himself also, or to leave early. One day, the Feast of the Annunciation, Francesco had intended to hear mass in state at the cathedral, but at the last moment changed his mind and went instead to the church of the Santissima Annunziata, alleging that he had a pain in his side and feared the damp and cold of the larger church. But the real reason was that he had just heard that Bianca intended worshipping at the Annunziata. To such childish subterfuges did the ruler of Tuscany descend!

Thus humiliated by her rival, Giovanna wasted away with jealousy and despair, for the gentle Princess had at last come to the end of her forbearance. Although officially treated with all due respect, she was met on all sides by polite indifference or thinly veiled contempt from the Florentine courtiers, who gathered round the powerful favourite and thought it not worth their while to pay more attention than their duties obliged them to the wife who had failed to maintain her position and was useless for the advancement of their interests. Giovanna's allowance of three thousand scudi a month was paid regularly, but she was so charitable in helping the poor, giving grants to convents, dowries to poor girls, and showering gifts on her faithful attendants, especially the Germans, that she frequently found herself in debt and was forced to ask Francesco for advances. But he who was such a spend-thrift for Bianca was a miser to his wife, and once when a poor man asked help of the Archduchess (for all the common people adored her and were not afraid to appeal to her generosity), she answered bitterly, 'Friend, you have

knocked at the wrong door; you must go to Bianca if you want help.'

Giovanna now made no attempt to conceal her anger at her husband's neglect. During the first years of her marriage she had found a consoler and protector in her father-in-law, but now the Grand Duke was a paralysed invalid and she seemed to have none to take her part. She naturally attributed her misfortunes wholly to Bianca's influence, and became so incensed against her that the favourite carefully kept out of her way as far as possible. One day as Bianca was crossing the bridge of Santa Trinità (that very bridge where Piero had met his assassins eighteen months before), she suddenly found herself face to face with the Archduchess, who was crossing from the opposite side, and surrounded by the Princess's devoted attendants, whose numbers were reinforced every instant by a crowd of people hostile to herself, who ran up, curious to watch the meeting between the rivals and ready to display their partisanship. The danger was great, and Bianca knew it. On beholding her rival before her, there in that narrow space where there was no turning aside, the Archduchess fell into such a rage that, obeying her first instinct, she ordered her servants to seize Bianca and fling her into the Arno, and only too willingly would the onlookers have assisted. But the gentleman in attendance on the Princess fortunately retained his presence of mind, and restraining the servants with a gesture, he persuaded Giovanna that the idea was a suggestion of the devil, which had the immediate effect of bringing her to her senses, and Bianca was saved. Horrified at the crime which she imagined herself to have committed, Giovanna turned round and went back to the Pitti and sent at once for her confessor, accusing herself of murder in intention, and it was long before the priest and her German attendants succeeded in restoring the poor Princess to a resigned and more peaceful state of mind.

An event now befell which was a misfortune not only for Giovanna but for all Italy; this was the death of Cosimo,

His constitution had been more than ordinarily vigorous and robust, but it had given way before the strenuous life he had led, the hunting, ball-playing and other violent exercises which formed his recreations from the labours of state business; and probably the equally violent remedies recommended by the medical science of that day, called in at the first signs of failing health, had only served to aggravate the mischief. For years he had suffered from gout, and a third attack of apoplexy had overtaken him in Pisa in the November of 1572, causing the greatest anxiety for his life. He recovered for the time being; but unfortunately any good the doctors might do him was counterbalanced by the worry caused him by his wife, Cammilla Martelli, who was still young and attractive and rebelled at being obliged to spend her time in attendance on an elderly invalid. Her vanity had been so excited by her elevation from the modest position of her family to that of Cosimo's wife that she tried to dominate over him and all his court and become the chief dispenser of the ducal favours, thereby occasioning frequent dissensions between father and son. Acting on the doctors' advice, Francesco had endeavoured to separate her from her husband, but Cosimo loved her too much to consent, and the Regent only succeeded in obtaining his father's removal to Florence, where he himself could watch over him. All care was in vain, however, for the Grand Duke soon became helpless and speechless through paralysis, and at last, on the 21st April 1574, he breathed his last, to the sincere grief of Tuscany and of all Italy. His death wiped out alike the rancour of his enemies and the sometime discontent of his subjects, who remembered now only his great qualities and sadly contrasted the ruler who was gone with the one who was now to reign over them in name as well as in fact. He lay in state in the Palace attired in his robes and wearing his ducal crown and sceptre, and was then privately interred in the church of San Lorenzo. But in order that such a great prince should be suitably honoured at his decease, there was afterwards a

magnificent public funeral on the 17th May, attended by all the kindred of the House of Medici, the chief princes of Italy and all the court, clergy, magistrates, orders and military of the dukedom. As was the custom, the effigy of the dead Duke was carried in procession through the streets of Florence, followed by his three sons and the long train of mourners, and the pomp of the ceremonial in San Lorenzo, where the real body of the Grand Duke already lay, the countless torches and candles flaring against the rich black drapery which entirely covered the walls, and the multitude of personages assembled, made the spectacle unsurpassed by any funeral ever seen in Florence.

Cosimo was nearly fifty-five years of age at the time of his death and had reigned thirty-eight, during the last ten of which he had been content to yield the chief place to his son and only exercise his own authority in moments of grave importance. His descendants seemed firmly established, for he left three sons, and although the new Grand Duke had as yet no heir, the youngest son, Don Pietro, husband of that second Eleonora of Toledo whose eyes were like two stars, so brightly did they shine, had a little son born in the previous year and named Cosimo after his grandfather. Cosimo had provided for all his children in such manner that each could suitably maintain the position to which he was born. Ferdinando, the Cardinal, was now twenty-five years of age, and as he had always respected his father's wishes and inclinations, he had undoubtedly been the favourite with both him and Cammilla. Through her mediation he had often obtained considerable sums of money wherewith to gratify his open-handed generosity, and also the love of splendour and display of family pride which distinguished him at the Roman court and with which his father fully sympathised. Ferdinando's character seemed directly opposed to that of his elder brother; he had apparently inherited from Cosimo his stronger and better qualities, which Francesco seemed to have missed. He was as strong as Francesco was weak,

and he was, moreover, intensely jealous of the honour and reputation of his house, while Francesco, with no good pride of that kind, but avaricious and grasping only for his own ends, objected violently to Cosimo's liberality to his younger sons. He tried to assume authority over his brothers which they resented, and mutual hatred between the three was the inevitable result. That Ferdinando was not on good terms with Francesco, however, rather increased than diminished the affection the Florentines bore him.

Cosimo's chief claim to merit, however, lay in the flourishing condition in which he left his state, ever his first consideration. Tyrant and autocrat as he was in many respects, he was the kind of ruler needed at the time he came to the throne, and the improvements he accomplished both in Tuscany and in the province of Siena are ample witnesses to this fact. He had restored peace to Italy by his treaty with King Philip; he had paid off Tuscany's immense debt to the foreign merchants of Genoa and Flanders; he had repaired the old fortifications and erected new ones; he had organised the land forces, and at his death his fleet for sea defences consisted of twelve galleys. But the principal thing for which Cosimo's subjects owed him gratitude was his work throughout all his dominions, but chiefly in Pisa and the neighbourhood, of digging canals, confining rivers within their proper beds, draining marshes, and in other similar ways so improving the healthiness of the country that people were attracted to settle in hitherto uninhabitable districts, to cultivate the land and extend the commerce.

In the circle of Cosimo's own family it was the women who had the greatest cause to mourn his death. Cammilla had not loved her exalted husband and had been the plague of his latter years, but heavily did she pay for her conduct. On the very day his father was laid in his grave, the vengeful Francesco sent his young stepmother to be shut up in a convent in Florence, whence she was only allowed to come out once, on the occasion of her daughter's marriage, and

from which, when Ferdinando rescued her after Francesco's death, she emerged a broken and demented woman. Isabella and Eleonora had now nobody to stand between them and their brutal husbands, for the new Grand Duke had no sympathy with wives, even when his own nearest kin, unless it was to his direct advantage to protect them. But perhaps of all his family the new Grand Duchess Giovanna mourned Cosimo the most sincerely; he had been a kind friend to her, and now that the watchful eyes were closed and the supreme authority removed, her renewed fears of her husband added bitterness to her real regret for her father-in-law, for she felt indeed helpless and alone in Italy. And well she might. For, freed at last from the least vestige of restraint, Francesco ceased even to pretend a decorous line of conduct, and Bianca raised her ambitious head and emerged from the semi-retirement in which she had but bided her time, determined that now the Grand Duke was to be hers and hers alone.

After the adventure on the bridge of Santa Trinità, it had been deemed more prudent for Bianca to remove to a quarter of the city at some distance from the Pitti, where she would run less risk of unpleasant meetings with Giovanna. Francesco had, therefore, purchased for her the house and grounds in the Via della Scala, on the other side of the Arno, known as the Rucellai Gardens, the scene of many famous reunions of poets and scientists in the fifteenth century, and he entrusted Buontalenti with the task of rearranging the gardens and altering and beautifying the so-called 'Casino' that stood in their midst to make it fit for Bianca's habitation. No expense was spared by Francesco in the adornment of his mistress's new abode. The large ground-floor room that opened into the garden was enriched by frescoes by Alessandro Allori, the courtier-painter who so often drew Bianca's portrait and who here depicted her on the walls of her own house as the sleeping figure of repose. Her own private apartment was hung with crimson velvet worked in gold, of regal splendour, and the rest of the

house was equally sumptuous in its arrangements and furniture, as suited the magnificent entertainments she gave during the three years she lived there. As these alterations took a considerable time to complete, however, Bianca was not able to take immediate possession of her new dwelling and was obliged to go on living in the Via Maggio, spending the spring and summer at one or another of her country villas.

But now Bianca was to learn that even she, the successful, the all-daring, was to pay the penalty of her actions. Her body had never been as strong as her mental power, in spite of the appearance of health given by her rounded form and brilliant colouring, and the events of the last two or three years had left their mark on her, albeit unperceived. One summer morning in 1574, whilst in the church of the Annunziata hearing mass, at which Francesco was also present, she was suddenly seized with a fainting fit and had to be carried out of church unconscious and taken home in a litter. The Grand Duke had turned as white as she when he saw her borne out, and during the fever which succeeded to the collapse, and which for a time even threatened her life, he spent several hours each day by her bedside in a state of frantic despair, urging the most skilled physicians of the city to do their utmost for her. The sight of Francesco's grief made the patient much worse and plunged her in a condition of despondency which, added to her weakness, made her case almost hopeless. For the first time in her life death seemed near, and she even tried to set her affairs in order. She made her will, in which she desired that her body should be buried in the church of San Lorenzo, and left legacies to her servants and to various charities; to her daughter Pellegrina she left ten thousand gold florins for a dowry, her estate of La Tana to the Grand Duke, while all the remainder of her possessions were for those sons who never came, and failing them Francesco was to inherit.

This will was never proved, however, for Bianca took a

turn for the better and slowly regained her strength. After some time she was able to receive visits from the ladies of her acquaintance, but she was still subject to alarming fainting fits, and her progress back to health was so protracted that it was many weeks before she was able to be moved out of the close city into the bracing air of the Tuscan hills. Francesco's distress all this time was great, and not even the long-desired imperial recognition of his title of Grand Duke of Tuscany could compensate him for the loss of Bianca's society. It is, however, an ill wind that blows nobody good, and the many months during which her rival was forced to remain in the country was a time of respite and almost of peace for Giovanna. The good little Grand Duchess, merciful and compassionate even to an enemy in distress, showed genuine concern for Bianca's welfare, her charity moving her so far as to pray that the Lord would grant her a speedy recovery, but adding a rider beseeching Him to remove the Venetian from Tuscany for ever!

The second half of Giovanna's prayer was in vain, for Bianca made steady progress, and after more than a year of seclusion, she celebrated her complete restoration to health by a splendid banquet given at her villa of La Tana, to which she invited all the members of the Medici family. Donna Isabella came with her husband, Paolo Giordano Orsini, who was just then paying her one of his rare visits, and Don Pietro with his wife Eleonora of the star-like eyes, both these ill-fated ladies being close friends of Bianca; and even Cardinal Ferdinando, though he did not love the hostess, saw no reason for refusing an attractive invitation which his brother and sister accepted. Besides these, there were present forty of the principal gentlemen and ladies of the court, the only absentee of importance being the Grand Duke himself, who refused to attend, as his chronic quarrel with Ferdinando and Isabella on the subject of their extravagance was just then at an acute crisis. Isabella's husband was certainly a wild and vicious spendthrift,

who dissipated both her fortune and his own; but if Ferdinando spent large sums they went in extensive charities, in promoting the study of Oriental languages and in keeping up his establishment in Rome in the manner both he and his father considered incumbent on a prominent member of the great House of Medici.

With the cooler autumn weather Bianca returned to the city and took possession of her new house in the Rucellai Gardens. Here she was able to display a luxury and splendour in her entertainments which had been impossible in the narrow Via Maggio; she received the chief personages of the city and gave banquets in honour of state officials, just as though she had been a great lady of the court instead of a stranger in an irregular and unworthy position. But in those days princely favour regularised everything in the eyes of a court, and even the Venetian resident and other envoys of the Republic which had once set a price on her head, did not now disdain to accept the favourite's hospitality. Moreover, Pellegrina Bonaventuri, now of a marriageable age according to the ideas of that day, was betrothed to Count Ulisse Bentivoglio of Bologna, and the entertainments in celebration of the betrothal provided Bianca with an additional excuse, had she needed one, for extra display. In short, her position as the powerful favourite of the ruler was openly recognised, and she paraded the city in her gilt coach, with gentlemen riding beside her and a retinue of servants following, as though she and not Giovanna had been the wife and royal princess.

It would seem as though Bianca's soaring ambition, her cravings for wealth and power, must surely be satisfied now. She had everything Francesco could give her except his name, but if that were the goal at which she aimed, she knew how to hide her secret ambition and devote all her attention to the present. The ship of Bianca's good fortune seemed really at last to be sailing safely over a golden sea towards the promised land. But she alone knew how frail was the bark, how many and sharp the hidden rocks which

sometimes even grazed its keel, and never for an instant did she relax her vigilant look-out, or take her hand from the wheel, or trust to another to guide her over that dangerous main.

But if she was unable to win the people's love or appease their indignation, she had completely succeeded in gaining over to her side the principal ministers, who submitted to her influence and consulted her wishes even in affairs of state. Foremost of these was Serguidi, the Secretary of State; and there was a saying in Florence that Bianca and Serguidi were the real and only masters, and that to obtain anything it sufficed to be in favour with the lady, but that it was necessary to open the purse-strings very wide when dealing with her coadjutor. Between the personal charm of Bianca and the craftiness of Serguidi and his fellows, the Grand Duke soon became a mere puppet in government matters; by taking advantage of his passion for her, by humouring his weaknesses and considering his peculiar character, they succeeded in obtaining his consent to any measure they desired. His morose and melancholy character seemed only to find relief in Bianca's presence; although she held him in the hollow of her hand, she was too clever ever to presume openly, and her tact and deference let him believe that the initiative came always from him, which is the true way to govern such a man. Whoever desired to obtain a favour from Francesco or have a petition granted must first apply to Bianca; if she promised her support the applicant was sure of success, but if she refused her mediation it was useless to hope further, and those who were unlucky enough to have incurred her ill-will esteemed themselves still fortunate if they escaped utter ruin. But Bianca was never cruel for cruelty's sake, nor did she interfere with those who did not interfere with her. On the contrary, she was willing to do a kindness if she could, and it was not alone her own partisans and dependents who profited by her favours and generosity.

Except in private matters, her influence over Francesco

was by no means all for evil; indeed, in state affairs she was often a wise and capable counsellor, for, in addition to extraordinary intelligence and keen common sense, she was an excellent politician and knew, moreover, that in the welfare of the state lay her own best chance of future safety.

CHAPTER XIII

A HOUSE OF TRAGEDY

Cosimo's death made at first no apparent difference in the government, for the new Grand Duke had been for so long already the actual ruler that he made no change either in the constitution or the ministry. Yet in point of fact everything in the state, political and social, began to deteriorate steadily from this date. Although prematurely aged, Cosimo had kept a stricter check on Francesco than might have been supposed. While still apparently attentive to state affairs and foreign politics, Francesco, as has already been said, became a puppet in the hands of his ministers. His relations with other powers grew unsatisfactory, and directly Cosimo was dead the internal government became more despotic and tyrannical, personal fear and disinclination to action inducing methods of cruelty and repression which Cosimo's stronger rule would never have contemplated; for he knew how to keep order by other means.

But quite apart from all political considerations, the year following Cosimo's death was a dark and disastrous one in the annals of his family, which now seemed to sink to its lowest moral ebb. Although he faithfully executed his father's will with regard to their inheritance, Francesco was eager to remove his brothers to a distance from Florence, as their frequent objections to his authority and criticisms of his actions were a constant cause of anger. Cardinal Ferdinando, next in age to Francesco and heir-presumptive, was naturally the next in importance to the Grand Duke and the principal object of his jealousy. The two brothers presented a great contrast both in appearance and character; while

Francesco was dark and sallow like his Spanish mother, Ferdinando had a fresh complexion and was inclined to be stout; the elder was dull and melancholy in manner, the younger vivacious and high-spirited. In the eyes of the Florentines, Ferdinando came much nearer their ideal of a proper prince than did the actual ruler. Though very dignified and difficult of access, allowing no liberties to be taken with him, he was affable in conversation and had the gift of adapting himself to the persons with whom he was speaking. He was fond of pleasure and ready to share the entertainments of his familiars; but though he liked banquets and display, at table he was sober and sparing both in food and drink, and while the most generous of hosts to his guests, he kept the simplest table for himself, and for this reason usually took his meals in private or only in the company of intimate friends. He shared the family fondness for the chase and spent large sums on this amusement in Rome, but in addition he also loved horses, which Francesco did not. His long residence in Rome and wide outlook had early taught him the mutability of fortune; he was quick to estimate character, and esteemed persons according to their merit and not according to their rank and possessions. And it was this gift of insight, this keen judgment of the real natures of those around him, which rendered him immune to Bianca's charms, though he recognised her extraordinary ability, and caused him to exercise a close vigilance over her actions.

Ferdinando disapproved strongly of the changes now made in the laws and politics established by his father; he openly showed his disgust at Francesco's harshness towards Cammilla Martelli, doubly unjustifiable in view of the indignity of his own slavery to Bianca, and he did his utmost to comfort and support Giovanna, for whom he had always entertained both affection and pity. But Francesco was the master in Florence; Ferdinando could do nothing for the present, and so, tired of dissensions and full of bitterness and dark forebodings for the future, he returned to Rome with the inten-

Photo Brogi

CARDINAL FERDINANDO DE' MEDICI

From a portrait by Alessando Allori

tion of permanently residing there and showing himself in Florence as little as possible.

The younger brother, Don Pietro, was a cause of even greater annoyance to Francesco. He was a headstrong, unmanageable libertine, and with the money inherited from his father he now plunged into yet wilder irregularities; so that amidst the plottings of the dissolute youths of Florence, the daily violating of justice and the public insults levelled at Francesco and his favourite, there was no knowing into what scandals and tumults Pietro's pride and defiance might lead him. Only when he had persuaded this firebrand to take a tour through Italy did the Grand Duke feel somewhat safe.

These divisions were not likely to heal. Behind Francesco stood Bianca, already stretching out her hand to interfere in family matters, breathing insinuations into her lover's ears and secretly fomenting the fraternal quarrel. She loved the two princes as little as he did, for in Ferdinando she instinctively recognised a character as strong as her own and one over whom she had no power, and Pietro did not hesitate to call her by the name she now deserved. It was yet too early in the new reign for her to see clearly her most advantageous line of action, but for the present she deemed that her dominion over the Grand Duke was best maintained by separating him from his family.

But in spite of his brother's animosity, Ferdinando kept a watchful eye on the interests of the family, and he was the first to warn Francesco of the Pucci conspiracy, formed to exterminate the whole Medici family in Florence in revenge for the execution of Pandolfo Pucci, who had similarly conspired against Cosimo in 1560. The execution of the plot, which had designed the simultaneous murder of all male members of the Medici family at an intended gathering in Florence, had had to be postponed on account of Cosimo's death and the difficulty of catching the rest of the family together; and meanwhile the secret leaked out and spread to Rome, where Ferdinando was the first to hear of it. Young Orazio Pucci, the son of Pandolfo and promoter of

the present conspiracy, was arrested and executed with barbarous tortures which shocked all Florence, whilst his companions, all youths belonging to the highest families, were banished and their property confiscated, whereby Francesco's treasury profited largely. The Grand Duke's severity and the rapacity of his ministers only served to further alienate the Prince from his people, who were already dangerously disgusted at a ruler who himself practised every form of violence and licentiousness which he punished with the utmost rigour of the law in his subjects.

At the same time that the young rebels of the Pucci conspiracy were hanged or exiled, disgrace fell on another head. Mondragone, Francesco's former favourite and go-between, a double-dealer now as he had ever been, betrayed to King Philip Francesco's private joy at getting the best of a bargain in which the Spanish monarch was to give the town of Porto Ercole as security for a loan of 8,000,000 scudi; whereupon Philip promptly saw his error and declined to treat further. Mondragone was given a month to settle his affairs and clear out of Florence, but he was wise enough to depart even before that period had elapsed.

But outsiders were not the only victims of the violence which marked the new reign; Francesco's example was corrupting not only court and people, but his own family also. Don Pietro soon threw off all restraint and distinguished himself by a degree of wildness and depravity which culminated in tragedy and crime. He had married his cousin, Eleonora di Toledo, beautiful, attractive in every way, and now only twenty-one years old and mother of the little boy who was the only male heir of the House of Medici. But in her husband's eyes she had long ceased to exist: the libertine found no attraction in his own wife, and defenceless in those corrupt and fearful surroundings, Eleonora had succumbed to circumstances and paid him back in kind for his infidelity. The imprudence of herself and her favourites soon betrayed her, and Pietro, whose life was one long offence, felt his spotless honour tarnished by

the lapse of this outraged and deserted girl; and a stain of this kind upon his honour could only be washed away in blood. It was the height of summer, and he took her out to the old Medici villa of Cafaggiolo, a lonely, massive building in the valley of the Mugello, and there, on the 10th July, alone with her in the hot darkness of the silent night, he stabbed her to death and let her bleeding body fall and lie upon the marble pavement of the deserted hall. Then he knelt beside her and asked pardon of the Almighty for the crime he had just committed and which he called vengeance for her unfaithfulness, and in expiation thereof he swore solemnly never to marry again. The one or two servants who were in the place, and who had been despatched to remote quarters during this dreadful hour, were told that their young mistress had died suddenly of heart disease, and next day her body was carried back to Florence and buried in San Lorenzo, and all the city knew that she had been foully murdered. And Francesco received his brother with no sign of indignation, inexorably punishing those who were known to have been Eleonora's partners in infidelity.

But this was not all. It seemed as though the madness of murder had struck this family like a whirlwind. When Eleonora's body was brought back to the city, horror fell upon Isabella like a paralysing hand. Her husband, Paolo Giordano, Duke of Bracciano, was in Florence, whither he had come after a long absence; for most of his time was spent in Rome or with the witch who ruled him, Vittoria Accoramboni, whose own husband had already been murdered as one obstacle the less to her becoming Duchess of Bracciano. Fear of Paolo had always been uppermost in Isabella's mind, and now in a flash she realised the influence her young sister-in-law's fate might have upon her own; she saw all family ties loosened and help nowhere. But Paolo Giordano smiled upon her more gently than usual, and his unwonted courtesy allayed her nameless dread that day. She and Eleonora had been friends and the circumstances of their married lives much alike. But if the younger woman

had divided her favours, Isabella had encouraged none save her husband's cousin, Troilo Orsini, in whose care he had deliberately left her; for between Paolo Orsini and Pietro de' Medici there was little to choose in the matter of evil life.

On the day of Eleonora's funeral service in San Lorenzo, the 16th July, Paolo decided to go into the country, to the villa of Cerreto, for some hunting, and contrary to his custom, he invited his wife to accompany him; it would distract her from her sorrow, he said. Isabella tried to refuse, but she knew instinctively that her fate had overtaken her. In deadly apprehension she accompanied her smiling husband to the hunting castle. There, contrary again to his custom, he came to her room as she was preparing to undress for the night; and as he sat on a couch beside her, still smiling into her hopeless, glassy eyes, he drew from his pocket the silken cord that had leashed his dogs and, twisting it sharply about her white neck, strangled the life out of her. So died Isabella, Duchess of Bracciano, Cosimo's favourite daughter and the most brilliant woman of that unhappy race. It was given out that she had died of sunstroke, but her blackened and swollen face told a different tale, and all who saw the corpse knew that either poison or the cord had been the true cause of that death. She was brought to Florence and interred with even greater pomp than had been accorded to Eleonora, and not only did Francesco and Ferdinando remain on friendly terms with Orsini, but they helped him to pay his debts and bring his tangled affairs into something like order. If Francesco had discovered Isabella's attempts to get Bianca away from Florence, spite was enough to make him concur in her murder; but Ferdinando was an upright man as uprightness went then, and had always been Isabella's friend, and hence the true reason of her death remains another of the unsolvable mysteries of the House of Medici.

Giovanna wept bitterly for her sisters-in-law, whom she had loved and of whom she knew no evil. Finding her in tears one day, Francesco threatened her with a like fate if

she did not cease mourning for them. And henceforth he kept her in subjection by sheer terror, for he issued orders to her women that they should always instantly leave her apartment when he entered it, and poor Giovanna nearly fainted with fear whenever she saw her husband come into her room, expecting to share the fate of the sisters she was forbidden to mourn. Isabella's lover, Troilo Orsini, fled to Paris, where he was protected by Catherine de' Medici. The consequent broil between that queen and Francesco was only a flaring up of the ever smouldering hate and scorn she always bore the representative of the junior branch of her family, whom she considered had no right upon the throne of Tuscany, and Francesco's revenge showed itself in the subsequent murder by his orders of the Florentine refugees in Paris.

Although both the dead women had been her friends, Bianca showed no sign of grief; she followed Francesco's lead in all things and even kept on good terms with the two husbands. When Isabella's wardrobe was sold to pay her debts Bianca purchased all the underlinen, betraying no sentiment for one who, she had once boasted, had been more than a sister to her, but whom it was now to her interest to disown. Friendship and love and even death itself, so long as she and Francesco survived, were as nothing to Bianca now, for she was preparing the master-stroke of her life, the great *coup* by which she hoped to ensure her own safety and supremacy for good and all. And the next death in the Medici family was but one more obstacle removed from her path.

Isabella and Eleonora had each left a young son; Don Virginio Orsini found a second home at the Pitti Palace, but for the other child, younger and more fragile, life soon proved too hard. Eleonora's little son Cosimo was now the only legitimate male heir to the throne of Tuscany, failing the birth of a son to Francesco and Giovanna, an event which it seemed vain to expect. On this child of barely four years old rested the hopes of the family,—hopes, how-

ever, which it seemed nobody's business to tend and foster, for before poor Eleonora had been a month in her grave, her neglected, motherless baby was dead too. And only a few days after his death, in the August of 1576, Bianca's long-prepared scheme was carried into execution.

Bianca had always had a very clear appreciation of public opinion as regarded herself and of what her life would be in the event of Francesco's death, or if she should fall out of favour with him. Mad as was his passion for her, she knew that a nature like his, weak, suspicious and melancholy, was quite capable of suddenly conceiving for her a hatred as violent as was now his love. To fleeting and superficial infidelities she had had several times to feign blindness, and even his aversion to his stepmother had not restrained him from intriguing with Cammilla's niece, the beautiful Violante Ghinucci, a temporary fancy which had caused Bianca both alarm and anger, but which she was too clever in her management of him to resent openly. But now, feeling herself perfectly free since death had closed Duke Cosimo's vigilant eyes, she conceived a plan for the attaining of her ultimate goal which no woman save one as bold of project and fertile of resource as herself would have dared even to imagine.

Francesco had promised to marry her in the event of both becoming free, but a condition for the fulfilment of that promise was that she must have previously borne him a son. The sickly Giovanna might certainly disappoint her hopes and live to a good age, as semi-invalids often do; she might never become Grand Duchess, or not until youth was long past and the triumph had lost most of its glory, but if she were the mother of the heir everything save the title would be hers. Francesco's dearest wish was for a son to succeed him, for the thought that either of his hated brothers should inherit his throne was unbearable; and failing a legitimate son, even an illegitimate one would be welcome, for illegitimacy was no bar to succession in that family. Bianca knew the boundless power that would

rest in the hands of the woman who fulfilled this dearest wish. Well if no darker thought crossed her mind, no intuition that if she could show Francesco a boy of his and hers, Giovanna's feeble hold on life would be loosened and her own speedy elevation to the position of Grand Duchess certain. Ambition is an evil counsellor, and moreover, in the not unlikely event of Giovanna's death the Florentine law would favour her promotion to the throne if she were the mother of the recognised heir.

Since the birth of Pellegrina, Bianca had borne no other children and her hopes in that direction did not seem likely to be fulfilled. Yet she had left no means untried which the medical knowledge of that time, or even superstition, could suggest; there was no sorcerer or witch, no travelling quack or Jew whom she had not consulted, whose spells and potions she had not employed. But all in vain, and finding nobody who could help her, Bianca determined to rely once more on the one who had hitherto never failed her, namely, her own self. If nature denied her the son she now felt she must have at all costs, he must be obtained by other means.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TWO SONS

The plan which Bianca now proceeded to put into execution had been long prepared. She had chosen assistants on whose fidelity she could rely, persons in her pay whose future depended on her favour; each one, man or woman, knew the part he or she had to play, but the whole plot complete was known only to its authoress and to two servants whom she could trust implicitly and to whose material advantage it was to serve her faithfully. These persons were a Florentine named Pietro Elmi, from whom few of his mistress's secrets were hidden, and a middle-aged woman called Giovanna Santi, also a native of Florence. Santi was the most attached of all Bianca's servants and apparently the one least likely to betray the secret, and to her were entrusted the principal arrangements for the carrying out of the plot.

Having received their instructions, these two servants had sought out in various quarters of the city three poor women who had been abandoned by their lovers and who were all expecting to become mothers about the same time. On one pretext or another they were approached by Bianca's agents with offers of help, and, all unknown to each other, they were lodged in different houses where they could be kept under observation, their destitute state making them thankful to accept unquestioningly any charity or refuge that might be offered them.

Having secured her tools, and calculating that one of the three young women must surely produce a male child, Bianca next proceeded to fall ill, and before many weeks

had elapsed she had informed Francesco that he had another chance of obtaining a son. Francesco was beside himself with delight, and so blinded was he by satisfaction and so clever was Bianca's dissimulation that never for one instant did he suspect a trick, and every other person not in the secret was equally deceived.

All through the summer of 1576 Bianca played her comedy with consummate skill, which was assisted by genuine indisposition and the unsuspected commencement of the dropsy which eventually contributed towards causing her death. Everything was ready for the event which was to ensure the safety of her present position and future welfare. Now she only waited for a boy to be born to one of the three women kept in reserve at her expense before feigning herself overtaken by the preliminary pains and having herself conveyed in all haste to the garden house in the Via della Scala, where she had arranged for her imaginary confinement to take place in order that there might be less danger of discovery from Pellegrina and the others of her household.

To Bianca's consternation, two of the young women produced girls, and were consequently got rid of with their useless offspring as expeditiously as possible. Unless, therefore, she were to risk arousing suspicion by trying to obtain a new-born boy at the last moment, the success of her plan now depended on the third woman, a young widow named Lucia. This Lucia had fallen in love with a gentleman, a Knight of San Stefano, who had promised to marry her to one of his servants. But she had been discovered by Giovanna Santi, and being healthy and of good appearance and a likely instrument for Bianca's purpose, had been persuaded to leave her dwelling secretly and had been lodged with a baker in the Via della Forca, Santi taking good care that all traces of her should be lost. To assign a reason for the attention paid her, the poor thing was told that a wealthy lady intended taking her into her service as wet-nurse immediately after

the birth of her child, where she would earn sufficient money to support herself even should her marriage not take place after all.

Surely no poor waif had ever been so anxiously expected as was this one, but at last, on the 29th August, early in the morning, Lucia gave birth to a boy. Santi, who had been all night with the patient, immediately took possession of the child, telling the poor mother that as she was to nurse the lady's infant she must part with her own for the present, but that it should be taken good care of and soon returned to her. Bianca was warned at once by her accomplice, and pretending increased indisposition, she retired to her room and dismissed the ladies who were with her on the pretext that their chatter made her head ache. It was now given out that the birth of her child was imminent and she remained in seclusion all day, but towards evening she moved to the house in the Rucellai Gardens. Here the court physician, Pietro Cappelli, had been ordered by Francesco to await her arrival and remain in attendance on her, and though she would willingly have dispensed with his inconvenient attentions, she dared not send him away for fear of arousing suspicion. Under such circumstances it is not easy to deceive a physician, and on Bianca's arrival at the garden house Cappelli's doubts as to the genuineness of the patient's condition were instantly awakened, only to be amply confirmed before that night's work was over. But Cappelli was a courtier as well as a doctor, and knew that he would be wise to see no more than was intended for his eyes.

In great excitement, Francesco spent most of the day with Bianca, and only with the utmost difficulty could she persuade him to return to the Pitti for supper. It was absolutely necessary to get rid of him; Cappelli could be dealt with and ordered out of the room, but not so the Grand Duke, and there was but little time left for the final preparations. But directly the coast was clear and the brief twilight had deepened into darkness, a coach drove quickly

up the long, narrow Via della Scala and halted at the gate of the Rucellai Gardens; Pietro Elmi was driving and inside were Santi and another servant, who helped her to carry into the house various bundles and baskets of which she said the Signora Bianca had need. Concealed in one of these was the baby who had been born to Lucia early that morning and whom Santi had kept hidden all day in the city, for it was impossible to bring it sooner to the garden house and risk detection by its cries. Perceiving that something fresh was happening, Cappelli came into the garden with a lantern and saw the baskets carried into a room adjoining Bianca's, and then he understood perfectly what he had to do.

At midnight Francesco returned, accompanied by two familiar friends whom he wished to be witnesses of his child's birth. This was more than Bianca had counted on; the last act of the comedy must be spun out till chance or their own impatience removed these unexpected guests. She was furious, but she gave them a smiling welcome and saw to it that they were kept wide awake. The night passed in great discomfort and nobody went to bed, until at last, towards daybreak, the interesting invalid herself withdrew with Santi into her private apartments. By this time even Francesco was weary of waiting, and as he did not wish to be seen leaving Bianca's house at that hour of the morning, he declared he must return to the Pitti before it was light. Then Bianca played a bold card. Seeing him preparing to leave the house, with feigned eagerness she begged him to stay, and Santi added her humble persuasions to those of her mistress. But Bianca knew she might safely reckon on Francesco's obstinacy; if he said he would go home she knew he would, and go he did, taking his friends with him. This was the moment for which the accomplices had waited. There was now nobody in Bianca's room save her woman and the physician on duty, while Gismondo, the servant who had accompanied the coach, paced to and fro in the hall below; all the others

had been dismissed to bed long ago; the play could advance. Bianca sank into her pillows with a groan, and Giovanna Santi in alarm prayed the doctor to find Gismondo and bid him bring some wine with all speed. Perfectly aware of the situation, Cappelli went on the errand, and when he returned to the sick-room Santi held a child on her lap and cried out to him that a boy was born.

Whilst the physician pondered on the deception and watched the woman wash the child in wine, as was the custom then with new-born infants, news was sent to Francesco. He had only just got into bed, but he instantly dressed again and hurried to the Via della Scala; and there, beside himself with delight, he took the baby in his arms, called him his son and gave him the name of Antonio, because he believed him to have been born through the intercession of that saint. The child was immediately accepted as an illegitimate member of the House of Medici, for Francesco made no secret of what he supposed to be his parentage and willingly accepted the congratulations of his wily courtiers on the long-hoped-for arrival of a son, though assuredly it was not the kind of son the state wanted.

So far Bianca's daring imposture had been entirely successful, and it was a considerable time before even the shadow of a doubt was cast on the little Antonio's parentage. Francesco was completely duped, though eventually, as will be seen, she found it expedient to confess the whole story to her credulous lover.

The fate of the two women who gave birth to girls is not known, nor is it of much consequence. The popular hatred which laid every crime at Bianca's door asserts that they were drowned in the Arno by her orders, but needless cruelty was never one of her characteristics, and the women, knowing nothing and believing they had been assisted out of pure charity, were quite harmless. But with Lucia the case was different, yet even she escaped with her life and a provision of money. Whilst the sham mother, strong and

well, lay on her soft cushions, surrounded by every luxury and worshipped by the most passionate lover, who feared lest a hair of her head should be hurt, the real mother was crying for her vanished child and for the strange things which were happening to her. On the day after she had been so ruthlessly robbed of her baby, she was placed on horseback, at the risk of her life, and taken to Bologna by a certain humpbacked doctor named Gazzi, who had helped Giovanni Santi in the care of her. Ill and terrified, the poor creature was made to swear never to speak of the incidents of her child's birth, and Gazzi obtained for her, under another name, a situation as nurse in the family of Count Pepoli in Bologna. Some months later Gazzi, whose home was in Bologna, fell hopelessly ill; but before he died he sent for Lucia and to ease his conscience told her everything, and bade her, if she valued her life, keep the secret and never return to Florence for fear of Bianca's anger. The poor woman was too frightened even to remain any longer in Bologna and for years she wandered about under an assumed name. Only after the death of Bianca, when the jubilee year brought a general amnesty, did she find courage to confess the whole story to a priest in Bologna, whither she had ventured again with an honest artisan she had married, and beg him to obtain from the new Grand Duke, Ferdinando, permission to return to her native city.

The principal victim of the fraud being thus disposed of, and the few persons who had perforce learned the secret knowing it to be to their advantage to keep silence, Bianca felt free to indulge in a little breathing-space and give her whole attention to her daughter's wedding festivities. Pellegrina, who had inherited a full share of her mother's beauty and intelligence, had previously been betrothed by Bianca to Piero Strozzi. The proposed match not meeting with Francesco's approval, however, it had been broken off in favour of his own friend and adherent, Count Ulisse Bentivoglio of Bologna, and as the Grand Duke was bearing the whole expense of the marriage, including the dowry of

thirty thousand scudi, he certainly had some right to a vote in the disposal of this well-favoured, well-educated and well-gilded young lady.

But although Bianca thought she had made all things safe and pursued her way triumphant, suspicions presently became rife in Florence concerning the origin of Don Antonio, in spite of all precautions, of threats and rewards. Certain sharp-eyed ladies who called themselves Bianca's friends gave meaning hints to others when they met at mass; Pietro Elmi had a brother-in-law, servant to another family, who plumed himself on his relative's importance in the favourite's household and gossiped of the presents he had just received for some secret service. Foremost of all to doubt was the Cardinal Ferdinando, the heir-presumptive, the one whose rights would suffer most by the birth of a son to Francesco. But he was a man of integrity and wisdom, and until he could prove his doubts to be well founded he judged it wise to hold his peace. Not until Francesco had been dead and he himself on the throne five years, did he admit, in his declaration of Antonio's real parentage, the suspicions he had formed the moment he heard of the child's birth, 'Seeing how that, by the grace of God, I am no fool' (*non sono balordo*), and disclose the investigations he had instituted that he might satisfy his conscience that he was not attributing more sins to Bianca than she had really committed, or subsequently usurping any rights from his brother's lawful heir.

The court physician, Pietro Cappelli, had surely divined the whole plot in the first hours of waiting in the garden house; but, knowing with what manner of woman he had to deal, he behaved with a discretion that afterwards had its reward, and when he was free to open his lips his revelations had no power to work either good or evil, for the secret was out. The only person completely duped was the Grand Duke himself, and the only person whose indiscretion brought down Bianca's vengeance upon her was the most trusted, the most responsible of all, Giovanna Santi. It

was the usual thing where the servant holds the mistress's secret; she had the courage and cunning to help in the playing of a dangerous game and felt she had her mistress in her power, but, like all her class, she had not the wit to discern how to wield that power to her own lasting advantage. The trusted servant presently became the domestic tyrant, but Bianca, a good mistress to her own household, bore with her for the sake of services rendered. At last, one day when Bianca had occasion to reprove her for some duty neglected or ill-done, Santi dared to resent it, and losing her temper, threatened her mistress with disclosure of the great secret. Bianca instantly perceived danger where she had least expected it; but she looked calmly at the woman and feigned not to understand the threat, and from that moment Santi's fate was sealed.

Pellegrina Bonaventuri's wedding took place towards the end of January 1577, and when she set out for Bologna her mother accompanied her, to see her settled in her new home.

A temporary absence from Florence suited Bianca's plans very well just at this juncture. Her imposture having succeeded, as she thought, it was well to let the first tongue-wagging cease and give the Florentines time to forget some of the details which scandal had spread through the city. Giovanna's comforting belief that all relations were over between her husband and the Venetian had not lasted long. The increased splendour and luxury of Bianca's mode of living had revived her suspicions, and there were not lacking the usual truthful friends to confirm them. That the favourite should maintain an appearance compared with which she, the Emperor's daughter and the Grand Duke's wife, looked mean and neglected, was but adding insult to injury, and when she learned that her rival had given her husband a son, a joy she herself, the wife, was denied, her jealous rage at last knew no bounds and she could not control herself even in Francesco's presence. Such miserable scenes occurred between the ducal pair that on one

occasion a lady-in-waiting dared to interfere to prevent Francesco striking his consort in his blind anger at her reproaches, and Giovanna made frantic appeals for protection to her own family. As the Grand Duchess was expecting another child in a few months, these scenes were most dangerous to her already enfeebled state of health, and Bianca had no wish to be in any way blamed for her death if one of these paroxysms of excitement should prove fatal. So in February she went to Bologna with Pellegrina, travelling in great state, attended by a long retinue of servants and followed by a train of court mules led by ducal muleteers and carrying the bride's trousseau and her own voluminous baggage.

The ladies spent three days on the journey and on their arrival in Bologna were received with much ceremony, though more out of respect for the Grand Duke of Tuscany than for themselves. A company of ladies and gentlemen rode out to meet them and greeted them with music and singing and volleys of firing, while festivities and banquets innumerable were given in honour of the young bride and her mother. Bianca spent several months in the Bentivoglio establishment, though Bologna might have been deemed a dangerous place for her; but Gazzi was already dead, and Lucia had fled from the city and was wandering homeless under a false name. Santi, of course, travelled with her mistress. Since that first indiscretion in a moment of temper she had been wise enough to hold her tongue, and trusted that Bianca had forgotten the incident; but Bianca was not one to forget a warning.

But now, perhaps for the first time since her marriage, the Grand Duchess was to play the principal rôle at her own court. In the previous October her brother, the Emperor Maximilian, had died and been succeeded by his son Rudolph. The young Emperor, who was only twenty-eight, was desirous of friendship with Francesco and had made peace between him and the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, who had espoused Giovanna's cause and nearly had

Photo Alinari

PELLEGRINA BONAVENTURI
From a portrait in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence

an open quarrel with her husband; and Francesco in his turn was then once more reconciled to his only too willing wife, his private satisfaction at the birth of Antonio making him more amiable, if more indifferent than ever, towards his lawful partner.

And now the unexpected happened. It seemed as though the false son had been but the herald of the true, for on the 20th May 1577, Giovanna at last gave birth to a boy, whose life, however, seemed so uncertain that he was hastily baptized at midnight by a priest summoned from San Giovanni, without even waiting to select a name for him. In his gratification at the birth of a legitimate heir Francesco temporarily forgot the illegitimate son, and for once the wife took precedence of the mistress in his thoughts. This was the son he could exhibit proudly to all the world, the heir whose rights none could possibly dispute. The whole world seemed suddenly to have changed for the little Grand Duchess; she had a living son, her husband was kind, the rival absent, and when a few days later the doctors pronounced that the baby prince, Don Filippo, was likely to live, she thought her cup of joy was full and her husband hers for ever.

The whole state rejoiced over the birth of the heir and the population of Florence went temporarily mad, for the gentle Austrian was beloved by all the people and they were delighted at her happiness and the discomfiture of the hated Venetian. Money was flung from the windows of the Palazzo Vecchio; casks of wine were placed outside upon the *ringhiera*[1] for the people to drink of and carry away at will, and so much was spilled that it ran through the streets even to the Ponte Vecchio; bread was given away, and for two nights there were fireworks on all the principal churches and buildings and on the private houses of all gentlemen holding positions in the magistracy. The festivities lasted till Whitsunday and it was proclaimed a time

[1] The raised stone platform outside the Palace, where the statues stood.

of public holiday; freedom was granted to debtors who would otherwise have been liable to arrest if they had appeared in the streets; and the *Potenze della Città*, or Guilds, obtained permission from Francesco to erect booths and hold games, sham fights, and processions and all sorts of exhibitions of skill, and their old banners, made in the time of Alessandro de' Medici and since confiscated, were restored to them. The Guilds kept up their celebrations during all the month of June, and they reached their climax on the Feast of St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence, which happened to fall on a Sunday this year and afforded an additional opportunity for the gathering of an immense and tumultuous crowd. A great loggia was built up before the church of San Lorenzo, extending from side to side of the piazza; on fourteen high columns hung the arms of the fourteen chief families of Florence, with those of the Medici in the centre and their portraits hanging round; in the loggia sat the king of the revels, who had been chosen by ballot, and his court, all, of course, gorgeously attired. In the middle of the square was a terra-cotta Bacchus from whose feet sprang three fountains of water high in air, and in its left hand was a measure out of which flowed wine into a basin for whoever liked to drink; round the square were triumphal arches and symbolical designs. The performance commenced at six o'clock, when the heat of the day was over, with a state arrival of the king of the revels and the heads of other districts and a long train of followers representing all manner of characters, after which there were games and wrestling till dark; and though it rained the next day, an awning was drawn over the piazza and the amusements continued as far as possible. For three days after the baby prince's birth the people ran riot and got beyond control. They tried to release the prisoners from the Stinche[1] and were repulsed by the soldiery, and taught that the gift of pardon belonged to the Grand Duke

[1] The prison of Florence.

alone. Peasants carrying their agricultural implements and workmen engaged on the villa of Pratolino trooped into Florence in a great procession, with huge ox-carts gaily decorated and laden with wine and wood; in front of the Palace a halt was made, and the wood set alight to the sound of cheering and cries of 'Vivi il gran re di Toscana.' Then the crowd moved on to Don Pietro's palace in the Via Larga, and that morose and cruel prince had long tables set up in the street and entertained the multitude lavishly, this public banquet being repeated for the various Guilds of the city. The Grand Duke called him extravagant, but whatever the faults of his two younger brothers were, they at least knew how to live and entertain as befitted their family and position, and never grudged spending for the pleasure of the people. As far as the Cardinal was concerned, the birth of a son to Giovanna meant the downfall of his own hopes of succession. But with him the pride of his house went before all things, and he rejoiced honestly that now there was an undoubtedly rightful heir and that there need be no question of inheritance between himself and that other child upon whose origin lay such grave suspicion and who, even if he were Francesco's son, was base-born, and the son, moreover, of a woman of whom he believed no good. If the noise of the constant firing and shouting and general tumult reached the ears of the invalid Giovanna as she lay gazing at the little son she had so long desired and was destined so soon to forsake, it may perhaps have robbed her of some moments' sleep, but surely no music ever sounded sweeter to her than this evidence of the public rejoicing in her own happiness.

CHAPTER XV

REVENGE IN EARNEST AND IN JEST

The news from Florence fell like a thunderbolt on Bianca in Bologna. With the birth of a legitimate son to Francesco her own hopes of supremacy sank to zero; all her months of plotting and patience were wasted, and useless was the danger into which she had knowingly run if her imposture were to be discovered. She heard how Francesco lavished attentions on his wife, of his joy in his son, joy open and unrestrained this time and shared by the entire people and state, and for the first time Bianca felt some of the rage and bitter envy she had so abundantly and remorselessly inflicted on the Grand Duchess. Not that she grudged Giovanna her child; to the harmless little Austrian herself in her private capacity Bianca bore no ill-will whatever; but she was the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, and she filled the place towards which the Venetian's insatiable ambition now soared as the only one which could content her. The girlish nature that had warped suddenly at the first discovery of her young husband's perfidy in Venice, and in which the gradual revelation of his baseness and the despair of the life in the Piazza San Marco had awakened the resolve to realise, in spite of everything and everybody, the day-dreams of power and freedom she had dreamed in her father's house, was now hard as adamant to move from her purpose, as one possessed in pursuance of her aim. But of small malice she was incapable; only those who stood in her path and hindered her progress were trodden under-foot, and she knew full well that she had gone too far along that path ever to retrace her steps, even if she would, and

that if once she faltered now or stumbled, her enemies would crush her face into the dust without mercy.

Thus the birth of Don Filippo was a bitter blow she had once foreseen, but long since ceased to expect; it was like a barrier which had risen suddenly across the path she was treading so boldly, and her rage and disappointment were intense. With reflection, however, Bianca's hopes revived. As the mother of the heir-apparent, Giovanna had regained her rightful importance in Francesco's eyes; but she was not capable of retaining it for long, and the first impulse of kindliness past, the first outburst of satisfied pride cooled, Francesco would weary of domesticity and return to the Via della Scala more eagerly than ever. Bianca knew the value of absence; besides, if Florence had been uncomfortable for her before, it would be doubly so now. So she stayed in Bologna quietly biding her time and sent Pellegrina back to Florence to be present at the state christening, which was fixed for the last Sunday in September.

Great preparations had been made for the ceremony. The interior of the Baptistry had been rearranged for the occasion by Buontalenti; the ancient font at which Dante Alighieri had been admitted a member of the church militant had been moved to one side and replaced by one new and ornate, over which rose the famous silver altar enclosing relics; an immense canvas, painted by Vasari in the space of one week, represented the baptism of Christ; twelve great statues modelled by Ammannati adorned the walls and a triumphal arch formed a portico at the door. Seats for the guests, rich draperies and countless lights and candelabra completed this dreadful disguise of the lovely little Baptistry, and cost Francesco the sum of five thousand gold scudi. The baby prince was borne to church in the arms of the Lord of Piombino, protected from the hot sun by a crimson velvet umbrella and escorted by an armed guard, and the rite was administered by the Papal Nuncio and witnessed by two cardinals, his uncle Ferdinando and Cardinal Sforza. But if the Baptistry itself had been spoiled

by the ceremonial trappings required by the taste of the day, the human element assembled surely made up for that. Two hundred and twenty-five young Florentine ladies, beautifully attired and led by Pellegrina, walked two and two to the church and ranged themselves upon the raised steps which circle the interior of the building, while five-and-thirty little children, dressed in white as angels and bearing lilies in their hands, surrounded the font and afterwards accompanied the baby back to the palace, a more fitting escort for his innocence than his father's armed guard. For the amusement of the princely guests and envoys who had come to attend the christening festivities Francesco arranged, amongst other things, a sort of wild beast hunt in the Piazza di Santa Croce. Lions, tigers, bears, wolves, wild boars, and other animals were let loose in the enclosure, and hunters armed in various ways gave an exhibition of their skill in despatching them, to the delight of the spectators who filled the stands erected all round the arena and the windows of the houses in the piazza. The wild beasts, it was noted, had lost much of their natural ferocity, probably through long confinement and the influence of the colder climate.

The festivities over and the excitement calmed down, Bianca prepared to return to Florence. It was during her stay in Bologna that she saw her brother again for the first time since her flight from home. This astute gentleman, having failed to lure his sister back with letters, thought he would try personal persuasion; and if that did not succeed in capturing her and her property, he thought he might at least share in the plunder which he felt sure she was amassing.

This was, however, not the Cappello family's first offer of reconciliation with the prosperous daughter. In the previous summer Bartolommeo had actually visited Bianca in Florence, but the visit had been entirely private and kept more or less secret. The fact was, the reconciliation was looked on with suspicion in Venice. Bianca lived at a rival

court and the suspicious Republicans feared that, blinded by private interests, Bartolommeo might betray secrets to the advantage of the Prince who had enriched her. The Ten had not, certainly, forbidden Bartolommeo to hold any intercourse with his daughter whilst she was still in a foreign state, as was usual with exiles and their families, but it was looked on with disfavour; and for this reason he was not admitted to the Senate, although he was a member of the great council.

In October, to seal the reconciliation, which she sincerely welcomed but which affected her less now than it would have done had it come earlier, when she had so sorely needed support, Bianca had spent seventeen thousand ducats in purchasing for her father another and more commodious palazzo in Venice, situated in the Piazza di San Marco alla Canonica. And at the same time she acquired a second smaller house next door, then not quite finished, which she gave to her brother, in order that her relatives might be more grandly lodged than in the old house near the Ponte Storto. She also settled on Bartolommeo a sum of money yielding a yearly income of four thousand scudi, an immense benefit to him, as he could not have kept up his new establishment on his hitherto slender income.

Instead of being satisfied with the generosity his sister had already shown him, it only whetted the younger Cappello's appetite for more and increased his anxiety to get complete control over her. So, on pretence of making the acquaintance of his niece, Vettore went to Bologna and there met with a reception as friendly as he could have desired. At such a moment, when Bianca was experiencing for the first time the torments of jealousy and exclusion from all she most prized, a visit from one of her own blood was strangely welcome, and very soon brother and sister had made friends. She even confided to him her hopes for the future and had offered to present him to the Grand Duke, which was equivalent to promising him wealth and favour. Vettore was enchanted; such luck was more than he had

hoped for, and he parted from her with an agreement to visit her in Florence as soon as circumstances should render such a visit advantageous. Where were now the outcries of wounded feelings and smirched honour? Silenced by the vision of wealth and ease which this same smirched honour brought with it as its price! Such manner of men were Bartolommeo and Vettore Cappello.

Bianca fixed her departure from Bologna for the month of October, planning a circuitous route by Lucca, Pisa and Leghorn, leaving Giovanna Santi to follow later with the baggage over the direct road to Florence.

It was the 10th November when the confidential waiting-woman and her fellow-servants reached the top of the Apennines and halted at a lonely inn for rest and refreshment. The mountain passes were infested by the bandits and robbers Cosimo had so vigorously endeavoured to exterminate, but whose numbers had increased enormously again under the lax rule of his successor, and the travellers kept well together for the protection both of themselves and the property they had in charge. Soon after it had resumed the journey towards Florence the party was attacked, but succeeded in routing its assailants. The robbers had, however, come out into the open, and with mingled surprise and terror Santi had had time to recognise through the disguise of outlaws the faces of certain of the Grand Duke's men as they took deliberate aim at her, and an instant later she fell mortally wounded to the ground. She was carried back to the little inn, crying out in her agony that she had been treacherously shot by the Duke's soldiers; and the inn servant, as he helped to bring her into the house, swore that in the armed bandits who had called there for wine as they passed early that very day, he too had recognised men whom he had previously known in ducal livery. The dying woman was conveyed back to Bologna and taken to the hospital, where the physicians, startled by her half-delirious ravings, hastily summoned a magistrate to take down her last confession.

The wretched woman, familiar with all the secret intrigues of the court servants, knew that these pretended soldiers were men in Bianca's pay, and she realised only too well that her fatal threat made to her mistress months before had not passed unnoticed as she supposed, and that she was now paying for her indiscretion with her life. Well, she would have her revenge, ever the supreme hope of the Italian; her mistress had killed her, but before she died she would lay a mine that should explode and ruin that mistress whom hitherto she had served so well. And then, in failing voice and blunt unvarnished words, she told the tale of Bianca's deception in all its squalid details, confessing her own and Pietro Elmi's complicity, and repeating that she had been shot by Bianca's orders to prevent her betraying the secret.

'And may God avenge me,' were her last words, 'they who killed me were assuredly soldiers of the Duke, and the servant of the inn did see and know them, and he knoweth that I speak the truth. But ye others can bear me witness that the Signora Bianca Cappello shall come to a bad end, worse than mine, because she hath caused the death of so many persons and hath betrayed the Duke.'

The last clause of Santi's confession, however, contained accusations for which was no foundation in fact. In her fear of approaching death, the fever of her wound and her desire for revenge, the woman had supplemented the actual truth with the vile tales and scandals her fellow-servants, horror-loving and ungrateful after the manner of their kind, had whispered about their mistress. The drowning of Lucia, which Santi asserted as a fact, was disproved by her reappearance ten years later, and the murder of a lover other than the Grand Duke, to whom with all her misdeeds she was ever faithful, were crimes none but popular hatred could ever attribute to Bianca. The horrified officials, not daring to make known in Tuscany a confession which implicated such important personages, signed and sealed it, and placed it in safe keeping in the city of Bologna until

they could learn what to do with so dangerous a document.

The death of this woman, so opportune for Bianca, only further deepened the suspicions entertained by the Cardinal Ferdinando, and one of his adherents (a certain prelate named Dal Pozzo, who owed his position to Ferdinando's protection and who afterwards became Archbishop of Pisa), undertook a systematic investigation of the whole affair of the birth of Antonio, with complete success. Although convinced of the fraud which was of such great importance to himself, Ferdinando knew that the time was not ripe for him to make it public. At the present moment such a course would have helped neither Giovanna nor himself, for Francesco would not have believed Ferdinando's word against Bianca's, especially in his present state of enmity and irritation against his brother, and the disclosure would only have been attributed to malice. Far better reserve the knowledge as a hidden weapon against Bianca wherewith to strengthen his own hands in case of need.

Bianca now returned home, but not to the city itself; recent events obliged her to be wary how she showed herself again in Florence. The general expectation was that now Francesco had a legitimate male heir he would send away the favourite. The birth of Don Filippo and the necessity of avoiding further quarrels with the imperial court, as well as for the sake of appeasing his own subjects, obliged Francesco to live with his consort at least in outward semblance of domestic concord. Ready as ever to grasp at any straw of hope, Giovanna buried her resentment and a decorous peace reigned for a brief space at the Pitti Palace.

In order to escape renewed humiliations, therefore, and perfectly realising the situation, Bianca kept away from Florence and lived at one or another of her country villas, only making occasional brief stays at her house in the Rucellai Gardens. Francesco went out to visit her whenever he could, and this partial separation from him was

really of immense advantage to Bianca, for inasmuch as it taught him to miss her constant presence, it strengthened anew the influence that had been somewhat weakened by her long stay in Bologna.

Bianca was too wise, however, and knew her Prince too well to risk a protracted absence. In the following year she returned quietly to Florence, leading at first almost as retired a life as she had led in the country, and her discreet behaviour deceived even Giovanna for a time, though the Grand Duchess had learnt by now to put little faith in appearances.

Although her relations with Francesco remained unchanged in devotion, Bianca soon became aware that certain accusations against her had reached his ears, though as yet he paid no attention to them. He still looked upon Antonio as his son, and there are letters extant which she made the scarce two-year-old boy write to his supposed father; but there were many signs to warn her that she could not hope for the secret to be kept much longer. With the birth of Don Filippo the chief reason for her fraud had vanished, and in any case the danger would be less if she herself confessed than if Francesco learnt from another source how he had been duped, and without possibility of doubt. So she determined to forestall her enemies and disclose the whole tale, trusting to his weakness and her own power to render the revelation of the trick she had played him harmless and obtain a sure test of his attachment to her. Nor was she mistaken. Had there been no Filippo already, Francesco's disappointment at being thus robbed of a son might have roused such anger that matters would have gone ill with Bianca. But Antonio was now of no importance, and Bianca knew so well how to choose the right moment for her confession, how to tune it to a merry note and accompany it with endearments and cajolery, that in amazement at her cleverness and malicious delight at the way she had deceived the world, Francesco forgot that he had been the first of the dupes and greeted

the revelation of his favourite's duplicity with laughter instead of rage.

Early in April 1578, Vettore Cappello paid his promised visit to his sister on his way from Rome with a party of Venetian companions, and his arrival was the signal for Bianca to resume her former conspicuous and sumptuous mode of living. She received him in the beautiful house in the Via della Scala, and by banquets, entertainments and festivities of all sorts, took care to display to the utmost the wealth and splendour which now was hers. Her own people had disowned her when she was friendless and poor, and there was a sweet revenge in showing them how well she had prospered in spite of them.

The groves and thickets of the Rucellai Gardens witnessed many scenes of gaiety and revelry that April, but none more quaint or more characteristic of the amusements of that day, of the fertile imagination in devising new effects and the callousness which permitted roughness and horseplay involving even personal injury if it amused the spectators, than was a certain practical joke planned by a friend of Bianca's, one Signor Camillo, for the mystification of Vettore and his friends. It was a joke, however, which was never seen by those for whom it was intended, as court mourning suddenly interrupted all festivities, but the Grand Duke tried it first on his own courtiers as a sort of dress rehearsal and it met with all the success desired by its inventors, for Francesco himself had contributed many of the details.

In a retired part of the gardens, near a loggietta where lemon-trees were stored in winter, there was dug a large deep round hole, which was then covered over with planks and sods to look exactly like the surrounding grass. The planks were fastened together to form a lid and attached to a chain underneath, so that it could be instantly upset, throwing any one upon it into the hole below. A passage was further dug from the hole to the loggietta, and the front of the loggietta was walled up to form a room. This being the stage, the properties consisted chiefly of pitch, sulphur,

assafœtida and other evil-smelling things for burning, while the actors were Signor Camillo himself as the wizard, thirty men dressed as devils, who were to rattle chains and howl through empty gourds like lost souls, and five or six beautiful girls in the airiest of garments, whose mission it was to console the victims after their adventures at the hands of the rest of the company.

The machinery having been proved in good working order by trying it on an unfortunate gardener, who had to be put to bed and medically attended before he recovered from his fright and bruises, Francesco was too impatient to await the arrival of Vettore Cappello and determined to have a private performance for his own amusement. Accordingly, he informed his gentlemen that he was going to witness an exhibition in the garden of the Signora Bianca of the powers of a famed sorcerer, who had promised to show him undreamt-of wonders, and that those who chose might attend him. The belief in magic was general in those days (Francesco himself taking a deep interest in such things, though, of course, on the present occasion he knew that a trick and nothing else was intended), and several gentlemen declined the experience; but so many others were eager for the fun that they had to be chosen by lot, amongst them being two Strozzi, a Baglione, Neri Ricasoli and others, as many only as the Grand Duke judged could stand within the circle over the pit.

When the guests were assembled at the appointed place and time, the sham wizard, got up as a sort of new Zoroaster, took a knife and, with ridiculous gestures and signs, cut a circle in the grass immediately over the hidden trap and roped it round, leaving only a narrow space for entrance, and within the circle was a bell, two immense braziers of lighted coals, a hazel rod and a jar of drugs for producing smoke. The Grand Duke having been accommodated with a velvet cushion to break his fall, and his unsuspecting friends grouped round him over the pit, the sorcerer requested all to lay aside their swords (a wise

precaution), and a spectator was then asked to act as assistant. A burly red-faced man, Sansetto d'Avernia, having offered himself, he was bidden take off his shoes and stand between the braziers, holding the rod in a threatening attitude and looking so absurd that the Grand Duke and every one roared with laughter; and so the trick began merrily. The night was now quite dark and the flare of the burning coals in the braziers added to the weirdness of the scene. Many and varied were the antics of the sham conjurer as he invoked his spirits with calls and whistles and ringing of bell. Then the amateur assistant was bidden throw on the coals a small quantity of the mixture of assafœtida, pitch, sulphur and other odorous ingredients; but in his ardour he flung on so much that he brought the first part of the entertainment to a sudden conclusion, for the smoke and stench was so intolerable that it assailed even the nostrils of the Signora Bianca, who, all unseen, was watching the proceedings from a window of the house, and the unfortunate group in the circle was nearly suffocated. The sorcerer called out for them not to be afraid, and clapped his hands, the preconcerted signal, whereupon the thirty devils instantly set up the most terrific noise, howling and shrieking and rattling their chains, while flames ran along the grass from numerous holes, so that the bewildered guests really did not know whether they were still in Bianca's garden or in the infernal regions themselves. And suddenly the earth opened beneath them (the braziers and jar being adroitly removed without the guests noticing) and they were precipitated into the pit, the devils howling above them, and the most incredulous then gave himself up for lost. But now a bright light shone out from the loggietta, and down the passage came a group of beautiful girls whose costumes consisted solely of golden mantles embroidered with jewels and pearls. These alluring damsels took the hands of the Grand Duke and such of his companions as had not been injured in the fall and led them to the loggietta, where

they were greeted by exquisite music and beheld a magnificent banquet spread for their refreshment, while the nymphs did their utmost to console the guests for their unexpected fright. Half the company, however, had been lifted more dead than alive out of the pit and carried into the house and placed on beds to recover, a detail which did not seem to interfere with the amusement of their more fortunate friends. All agreed that Signor Camillo was certainly the greatest of sorcerers, but Francesco refused to explain the secret of the mysterious adventure until it had been repeated with amplifications for the benefit of Vettore Cappello, for whom it had originally been planned. But, as has been said, this second entertainment never took place, for while Francesco was actually at the garden house superintending the preparations, messengers arrived to summon him back to the Pitti on account of the sudden illness of the Grand Duchess.

CHAPTER XVI

DEATH OF THE GRAND DUCHESS GIOVANNA

The Grand Duchess was again expecting another child and her always feeble health was more precarious than ever. The long strain had at last told on her, morally as well as physically; her resigned and religious character had grown nervous and irritable, and the fresh gaieties and publicity into which Bianca launched upset her to an extent which seriously alarmed her attendants.

Vettore Cappello had duly arrived in Florence and been received by his sister with great cordiality, and very soon she took him out to the villa of Pratolino, now nearing completion, to present him to the Grand Duke. This Pratolino was situated about nine miles distant from Florence, off the Bologna road, on the lower slopes of Monte Senario. Francesco and Bianca had come here by chance on one of their excursions, and the wildness and solitude of the neighbourhood pleasing them, Francesco had purchased a small villa and estate and, with the assistance of Buontalenti, had transformed it into a fairy palace of beauty and delight. The house was rebuilt and the immense new rooms were filled with paintings and sculptures and other art treasures of great value, and it was furnished with such boundless luxury and such exquisite taste that the writers and poets of that time described it as a dream of perfection. In the extensive gardens were vast grottoes decorated with many-coloured stones and mother-of-pearl; wonderful fountains kept the place green in the driest summer and delighted the ear with the soft sound of falling water. Musical instruments were hidden in the trees and played by the wind

as it rustled through the leaves; here and there in the gardens were mechanical figures of mythological gods and goddesses, or shepherds and animals who peeped unexpectedly out of the bushes. All these figures were set in motion by the fountains or by concealed waterworks, but appeared to the spectator to be alive, whilst the most notable of all the strange things here was the gigantic figure by Gian di Bologna symbolising the Apennines, now all that remains of the former glories. This beautiful place became Bianca's favourite residence, but the later Medicis neglected it and the Lorraine family abolished the villa altogether, considering, perhaps with reason, that there were too many royal residences for the size of the state and that the cost of the upkeep was too great; so that now only part of the gardens and what were once outbuildings or servants' quarters remain to satisfy the interest of visitors.

Francesco spent a deal of time at Pratolino, superintending the finishing touches being put to his new palace, and here he entertained the delighted Vettore for several days, making much of him and treating him as a guest of importance. On their return to the city the Grand Duke received the Venetian publicly at court, and even went to the length of presenting him to the Grand Duchess, a fatal mistake which only his new enthralment to Bianca after her long absence could have led him into committing. The appearance of the favourite's brother at court showed Giovanna that, in spite of all she had hoped, the relations between Francesco and Bianca had not changed, and the fresh disappointment threw her into such a state of agitation that she became seriously ill. It seemed, indeed, as though the patience of the long-suffering Princess was at last exhausted, causing her to give way in a manner quite foreign to her usually proud though gentle nature. One day while out driving she chanced to meet her husband and Bianca together on their way to Pratolino, and, as had happened once before when she came face to face with her rival on the bridge of Santa Trinità, Giovanna suddenly lost her self-control and,

overmastered by her passion and indignation, she cried to the woman who sat speechless by Francesco's side:

'Is this how you repay the confidence I put in you! Now you have lost it for ever, and sooner or later God will punish you for your unworthy acts!'

The Grand Duchess was so excited and upset by this meeting that she returned to the Pitti in a condition that alarmed her attendants. When at last she reached her own room, she stood for a moment shaken by agitation and blinded by tears, and then, before her frightened ladies could catch her in their arms, she fell fainting to the ground. Her child was expected in a few weeks, and the doctors feared for her life unless she could be persuaded into a more tranquil state of mind. But again piety came to her aid and helped her to face the situation she now, when too late, recognised as irremediable. A few days afterwards she had recovered her composure and she drove to the church of the Santissima Annunziata to pray for a safe delivery, a prayer not destined to be granted. As she left the church she swooned and fell heavily again, face downwards; she was driven back to the Pitti in all haste and the physicians were summoned, but in spite of all their skill, the poor limited skill of those days, it became evident before night that it would be impossible to save her life.

The poor Grand Duchess knew well enough that there was no hope for her, and far more bitter than her physical sufferings was her mental anguish at leaving her children in the care of such a father and the stepmother she foresaw he would give them. Francesco had been by her bedside all through the hours of suspense, comforting and encouraging her as best he could, for the moment wholly hers, his heart softened by remorse and pity; and when, after receiving the last sacraments, poor Giovanna in tears and mortal anguish bade him care for his children and remember the love she had borne him, he broke into loud weeping and rushed headlong from the room. Of Giovanna's children only four survived her: Eleonora, who married the Prince of Mantua; Anna, who died in childhood; Maria, who be-

came Queen of France, and little Don Filippo, the heir to the Tuscan throne. They were brought to her after their father had left the room and she kissed them farewell, and early next morning she died, aged barely thirty-two years.

The Grand Duchess lay in state a whole day in the great hall of the Palazzo Vecchio, and the Florentines were admitted to look their last on the 'Regina Giovanna' to whom they had been devoted ever since the day when she first entered the city, riding on her white horse through the Porta al Prato, her fair hair wreathed with silken flowers and love and emotion lending beauty to her pale face. At nightfall she was carried on men's shoulders to the church of San Lorenzo, followed by clergy and friars and all her court, and a great company of Florentine gentlemen. Here, with closed doors and without music or sound of bell, according to the custom of the time, the office for the dead was read (the public ceremony being deferred till a few days later), and then the bodies of Johanna of Austria and her stillborn son were laid with the others of the House of Medici in the temporary resting-place near the Sagrestia Nuova, waiting till a more gorgeous mausoleum should be prepared for their reception.

For nearly two hundred and eighty years the Grand Duchess lay in her temporary tomb, and when in 1857 the coffin was opened by order of the Grand Duke Leopold II. for the purpose of identification before being reinterred in the crypt of the Cappella dei Principi, the little body was found scarcely changed. The fair hair was dressed according to the fashion of the day when she died, and in her ears were golden earrings in the form of tiny bells. Her robe was of crimson satin, with a broad border of crimson velvet stitched with gold; over this she wore a sort of short jacket with sleeves, of alternate stripes of silver and rose-coloured silk, drawn in round the waist and adorned with lace at the neck. She had red silk stockings and white kid shoes, and the quaint overshoes, or pattens, were of velvet trimmed with gilt braid and with very high heels and soles, curiously carved, and on her breast was sewn a bunch of orange leaves.

Very little happiness had this Emperor's daughter had in her married life, but circumstances and an ill-assorted match were as much to blame as were individual offences. From first to last the simple and narrow-minded German was as utterly unfitted to hold her own in that centre of splendid luxury, artistic refinement and loose morals which was the court of Florence (a court which, with all her piety and humility, she despised as being small and upstart when compared with that of her imperial father), as she was unable to bind her Italian husband, a Medici moreover, by the same strict laws of morality and domesticity which were in force at the northern court, to a wife whose only attractions were her virtues.

It was the 10th April when Giovanna died, and from that day to the fifteenth of the month there was such extraordinarily cold weather, with frost and hail, that it was more like January, the coldest month of the short sharp Florentine winter, than like spring. The vines were stripped of their young shoots and all fruit-trees were spoiled for that year. And as this unusual frost commenced on the very night that Giovanna died, the superstitious people, when they beheld the whitened ground, believed that it was a sign that the heavens were mourning the death of the Grand Duchess, whom they already looked upon as more than half a saint.

Throughout those last hours of Giovanna's life Bianca had been in a state of extreme suspense, knowing that her own fate hung in the balance. Two nights before, for the convenience of some entertainment or other, she had slept at her house in the Via Maggio. And as Francesco had sat in her room after her guests had dispersed and the servants had closed all the doors, save only that private exit to which Francesco himself had the key, their talk had drifted from the day's events to their own private concerns; and she had lured him on to play the ardent lover for an hour, half idly, half to test again that power on which her life and fortunes hung. And then, as she gazed into the dark face of the Duke at her feet and noted with keen and watchful eyes its deepen-

Photo Alinari

GIOVANNA D'AUSTRIA, GRAND DUCHESS OF TUSCANY,
WITH HER SON, DON FILIPPO DE' MEDICI

(This picture, in the Uffizi Gallery, was probably completed after Giovanna's death, as the boy was only eleven months old at that time)

ing marks of weakness and indecision, a sudden thought of the sick woman at the Pitti across the way, a certainty that the end would come soon, made her so close her grip on the man before her that he responded wildly to her imagined caress. And Bianca made him repeat again the oath he had sworn before, to make her his wife if the chance occurred.

That the end foreseen would come so soon she had not guessed, but when next morning she heard of Giovanna's fall in church, she knew that a few hours now would change her lot for good or ill.

How would Francesco take it? Would he remember the renewal of his promise as a strange coincidence pointing the way, or as an ill-omened harbinger of death?

She watched and waited through each hour, as though Giovanna's dying cries had been borne to her across the intervening streets, and immediately she heard that the Grand Duchess was dead, she sent her servant Gismondo to the Pitti to summon to her the physician Pietro Cappelli, who had been in attendance on Giovanna all night. Ever since he had guessed the secret of Don Antonio and had held his peace there had been a tacit understanding between him and Bianca, and she knew that even if he were not a friend, at least she need not fear him as an enemy. In that first hour all natural feelings of sympathy with her rival and the motherless children were swallowed up in exultation at knowing her lover now free to wed her, and when Cappelli came to her straight from the Palace, from the dead mother and babe and the weeping children, the triumphant favourite forgot all decent restraint and cried to the physician as he entered her room:

'Give me your hand and rejoice, for now at last I can make your fortune! Last night the Grand Duke was here and swore on that crucifix to make me his wife!'

Cappelli, court servant as he was, took her hand and wished her luck; then straightway left her house, and never afterwards did he help Bianca in any way whatever beyond what his duties and official position demanded.

The state funeral of the Grand Duchess Giovanna took place a week after her death, with all due pomp and ceremony. The church of San Lorenzo was hung with black satin and lighted with countless white and yellow candles. According to the strange but necessary fashion of the time, when it was the custom for the dead to be carried with uncovered face to burial and public funerals were postponed often till long after death, a waxen image of the dead lady, made so life-like that many thought it was the real corpse, dressed in her robes and wearing a crown, was borne in procession on an open bier on the shoulders of the chief gentlemen of the court, and followed by the Grand Duke and an immense throng of officials and guests, Florentine and foreign, gathered to pay the last honours to the dead Archduchess.

Although Francesco had been stirred to genuine emotion by his wife's last words and had left her room in tears, he had soon recovered his composure. He desired that the funeral should be conducted with all possible magnificence, as became his consort and a near relative of the Emperor, but of real grief his heart was void and his behaviour that day drew down upon him the contempt of all his subjects. He walked behind the bier dressed in deepest mourning, his train carried by Pandolfo de' Bardi and a long veil depending from his cap, the correct figure of outward woe. But as the procession passed through the Via Tornabuoni, Francesco raised his eyes to a window where stood Bianca Cappello, a curious spectator of the last honours paid to her rival, and in defiance of public opinion, of the feelings of those around him, of common decency itself, he raised his cap to her when he came opposite to the window where she was, and she returned his greeting with a deep courtesy. This act was a scandal to all the city, and when it became known that, instead of remaining for the ceremony in San Lorenzo, the Grand Duke had left the church again immediately by the side door opposite the Borgo la Noce and returned to Bianca, the people's indignation against their ruler knew no bounds.

CHAPTER XVII

BATTLE

So long as Giovanna lived, the opposing forces that struggled for the possession of Francesco de' Medici had waged more or less covert warfare, but the moment she was dead they stepped out into the open. The Cardinal Ferdinando, too wise to underrate the enemy's power and desirous of leaving her no time wherein to lay such definite hold on Francesco that it could never be loosened, had immediately written from Rome proposing a second marriage for his brother, and naming several princesses with whom he might advantageously unite himself. Francesco thanked him, but flatly refused to hear of a second marriage, declaring that he had been sacrificed to the state long enough, and intended now to enjoy his liberty and not enter into fresh slavery.

Bianca, too, knew the value of time. She knew the strength of her opponent, that justice and right and universal sympathy were on his side, and that, if she were to capture the prize for which they fought, she must instantly make her secret influence felt and bind him by chains impossible to unloose. Long ago, when first he had tried to win her, as lately again, Francesco had sworn that he would marry her if ever they were both freed from their respective bonds, and now she made him renew before the Cross his oath to make her his wife as soon as the period of mourning should be over. What had she not sacrificed for him, she asked when he came to her after Giovanna's funeral, to the splendid house he had given her and which his bounty alone enabled her to maintain; if for no other reason, he owed her the reparation of marriage

to restore the self-respect she had lost for his sake, and it would ease both their consciences of the loads that weighed upon them and put an end once for all to the scandalous tongues that still wagged unceasingly at their expense. And Francesco promised readily enough; what was that piece of carven wood to him in comparison with the living woman who held it before his eyes and asked him to give her the place of the dead? He could deny her nothing when he felt the magnetism of her actual presence, but that sluggish conscience that this fresh marriage was to tranquillise awoke and smote him heavily even as he gave his word.

Like the runner in a race who sees the goal almost within reach, Bianca must now strain every nerve to attain that place her ambition had so long coveted. True, she had Francesco's oath, but a priest could loose him from that if he willed; he knew she was a convicted deceiver and had forgiven her, but would his love stand against the universal warnings that would be pressed on him anew? He must, moreover, risk the anger of the Austrian court if he married the woman who had been the ostensible cause of Giovanna's unhappiness, and the favour of Austria was necessary for the upholding of his position and ambitions.

Although completely dominated by Bianca, Francesco was still man enough to remember the duties of his position, and Giovanna's death had, as it were, pulled him up and forced him to consider the altered state of affairs. He now began to realise what the consequences might be of this proposed marriage with his favourite, and his reflections impelled him to consult his ministers of state and his confessor. They all with one accord declared that the promise could not be fulfilled; his confessor, Lorenzo Davidico, who had persistently condemned his connection with the Venetian, preferred to resign his position rather than give way, and the court chaplain, Giovanni Confetti, made separation from her a matter of conscience. Confetti was a man of unwavering integrity in whom Francesco put

implicit trust, and in his hands the Grand Duke left the decision of a question that was one not only of public importance but also of private conscience. Confetti subjected Francesco to a strict interrogation, to which he gave truthful answers, and on all four points on which the priest declared the possibility of the marriage depended, he was forced to give adverse judgment. The promise given during the lifetime of both the Archduchess and Bonaventuri, Francesco's tacit consent to Piero's murder, and the whole business of Don Antonio, as proving by Francesco's own credulity the relations existing between the pair, rendered a marriage canonically and conscientiously impossible. The idea of acting contrary to canonical law proved too much for Francesco and his temporarily active conscience, combined with other considerations, and he then and there promised Confetti to abandon the marriage and to make Bianca see the matter in the same light.

But Bianca knew Confetti and guessed what the result of the interview would be, and her only answer to Francesco's arguments was to keep her bed and starve herself with disappointment. A better answer for her purpose she could not have found. Flung back into indecision, the Grand Duke sent for Confetti again and begged him to reconsider his verdict. But the priest was not to be moved, not even by Francesco's description of Bianca's sufferings and his own infatuation for her, which was, he now admitted, such that he believed she had administered a love-potion to him, for he could think of nothing and nobody else when in her presence. Still the good priest stood firm, and, at last, overcome by his reasoning, Francesco vowed in his presence to abandon finally all idea of a marriage which would be displeasing to God as contrary to canonical laws, and abhorrent to his subjects for reasons it was useless to mention.

Francesco really meant what he said at the time of saying it, and announced the fact to those ministers who had been consulted. They applauded his resolve, and in order to

make it easier for him to keep it, they advised him to quit Florence for a time. Confetti, too, paid frequent visits to his doubtful penitent; and yielding at last to their joint influence, Francesco went first to the mountains of Pistoja and then to the island of Elba, remaining away several weeks, to the unbounded satisfaction of the Florentines, who considered the danger over and the detested aspirant to Giovanna's vacant place definitely dismissed.

After thus resolving to break the oath he had sworn to her, Francesco had not the courage to face Bianca again before leaving Florence, but sent Pandolfo de' Bardi to tell her of his decision and departure. With her finger ever on his pulse, as it were, she had known of his wavering; she had realised fully all the dangers of her position if his ministers' advice prevailed with Francesco for any length of time, and she had employed all the means she was mistress of to retain her influence, which seemed to be weakening just when she had imagined it would be permanently established. But for this total breaking of his word and sudden flight she was not prepared, and her rage and despair at the downfall of all her hopes at the very moment when she thought them about to be realised, almost overwhelmed her. For years Bianca had set one aim before her, to attain which she had sacrificed her conscience and her honour and the happiness of others, and now, at the word of an upright priest, her labours were become as naught,—she was nothing but the widow of Piero Bonaventuri. That Francesco should have submitted! That the priest should have prevailed against her! It seemed as though the hand of the dead Archduchess were stretched out from the grave, interposing a barrier betwixt her and Francesco which in life she had been powerless to raise.

Pandolfo de' Bardi consoled her as best he could, urging her not to despair. 'Surely,' he said, 'one priest was as good as another, so why not consult his brother, Fra Masseo de' Bardi, Prior of the Minorite Monastery in

the Borgo Ognissanti, who was himself a theologian of repute?'

As a drowning man catches at straws, so Bianca listened willingly to any suggestion. Fra Masseo had been her confessor for a time, and she knew him for an easy-going man who would probably be persuaded without much difficulty to share her view of the situation. So she accepted the proposal and Pandolfo went in search of his brother without delay, and, finding him favourably disposed, escorted him forthwith into the presence of Bianca and laid the matter before him.

But the wary friar would not commit himself all at once; such a case of conscience did not fall into his hands every day, and the Grand Duke was no petty parishioner to be preached at and hustled into compliance. So he listened and temporised and said he must hear both sides of the question before giving an opinion, and with fatherly smiles and honeyed words to counterbalance his professional caution, bade her take comfort and not abandon all hope. 'Only,' he said, 'since he had no excuse for presenting himself before the Grand Duke, it was His Highness who must seek an interview with him.' Pandolfo readily undertook to bring this about on the Grand Duke's return to Florence, for he was firmly convinced that Francesco would be only too glad to return to his old allegiance and find a way of evading the promise made to Confetti and the ministers.

Bianca meanwhile, genuinely nonplussed for the first time in all her adventurous life, outwardly exhibited an indecision as great as Francesco's own. It was not that she doubted herself; there was no perplexity as to what she wanted, as in the early days after Bonaventuri's murder; now she had but one desire in her mind, but under the circumstances of Francesco's unexpected behaviour, the problem was how to attain that desire with speed and safety. She plied the absent Grand Duke with distracted and appealing letters, entirely reversing their usual positions towards each other. At one moment she adjured him not to forget his

sworn oath, vowing suicide if he did, and at another moment she said she accepted his decision and begged only for a last interview before she left Florence for ever. This latter move she really seemed about to carry out, and even ordered her travelling carriages to be got ready; but though they stood in the courtyard waiting for the baggage, on one pretext or another the departure was delayed until Francesco returned, against his conscience, against all better feelings, but unable to remain any longer where Bianca was not.

But though the Grand Duke had yielded to the extent of returning to the city, he made a last effort to resist his own weakness by shutting himself up in the Pitti. Thus the man struggled to save his better self. And a few yards away, back again in her house in the Via Maggio, the temptress waited, drawing nearer actually as well as metaphorically to the place she wanted. Then, when she found he did not come to her, she sent messengers to him to tell him of her desolate condition. And when he was filled with the thoughts of her love and misery, she dared everything and went to him herself, appearing suddenly in his room at the Palace and throwing herself on her knees at his feet before the bewildered man could prevent her or flee from her presence. This was more than his resolution could stand, and the battle was won ere he could clasp her in his arms. The sight of the woman he so ardently loved and whom he had missed so long in tears before him drove away from his mind all promises made, all memory of ministers or priests and even of Giovanna's dying words, and he promised her all she wished.

This was the moment for which Pandolfo de' Bardi had waited. When he noted the signs of troubled indecision on Francesco's face he ventured to hint that it might be well to take a second opinion on the case, suggesting Fra Masseo, and he was curtly bidden to call his brother without further discussion. This time the astute Minorite knew what was expected of him, and came so well primed with arguments intended to prove that (although, generally speaking, the

decision of his reverend brother Confetti was perfectly correct) this particular case was an exception and could not be judged by ordinary laws, that he very soon calmed Francesco's conscience and dispelled his inconvenient doubts. It is no difficult task to convince a man who is only longing to be convinced! Having, therefore, considered the matter from all points, Fra Masseo gave it as his opinion that the Grand Duke owed it to his conscience to wed the Signora Bianca as soon as possible.

The marriage, however, could not under any circumstances take place before the year of mourning for Giovanna was over; but Francesco resumed his old habit of spending a large portion of his time in Bianca's company, and on the excuse of visiting his orphan children (who knew nothing against their mother's rival and welcomed her as a friend, for she was always good to children), she even ventured into the Pitti Palace. And now the fates seemed to turn again suddenly and be favourable to her once more, for the unwonted agitation of mind Francesco had undergone, combined with his irregular life and the fatigues of his long hunting expeditions, brought on an illness just at this time which threatened serious consequences. Here was Bianca's opportunity, and greatly daring, in view of public opinion and the crisis at which her affairs then stood, she penetrated even to her lover's bedside and constituted herself his nurse, and he had neither the power nor the will to send her away.

One morning, it was the 5th June 1579, the dangerous situation was brought to a sudden end, in a commonplace way enough. The invalid refused food, declaring that he could not eat; the amateur nurse brought an egg to his bedside and coaxed him laughingly:

'At least take this egg, as a gift from me,' she said: 'eat it, and you will assuredly feel better!'

Francesco took the egg, and as he ate it he made a sudden resolution. Calling Bianca to his side again, he laid his hand in hers and said:

'I am certainly better for your gift, and I thank you for it. And *I* have owed *you* a gift since long, which I will now offer you in return for yours. Here is my hand; you shall be my wife.'

And that same day they were secretly married at the Pitti Palace by the obliging Fra Masseo, whose convent lost nothing through his convenient theology, whilst he himself was made Bishop of Chiusi and retained the permanent gratitude of the bride for his devotion to her interests.

Thus, less than two months after the death of the Archduchess Giovanna, Bianca attained her goal and found herself the lawful wife of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. The marriage was to be kept secret until the year of mourning had elapsed, but Francesco ordered apartments to be prepared for his new wife in the Palace, of which she immediately took possession. She was officially appointed governess to the Grand Duke's children, which appointment afforded a pretext for her taking up her residence at the Pitti and served to conceal the marriage from the knowledge of every one save the actual witnesses.

Hearing of his brother's serious illness, and desiring, also, to verify fresh disquieting rumours which had reached him concerning Bianca, Cardinal Ferdinando journeyed from Rome expressly to visit the invalid, and was both surprised and shocked to find Bianca installed at his bedside and behaving as though she had every right to be there. Although it was contrary to his custom to interfere in such private matters, Ferdinando could not refrain on this occasion from remonstrating with his brother, pointing out the grave impropriety of the favourite's presence at such a time, whereupon Francesco was forced to confess that he had married her secretly. The news struck the Cardinal like a blow; he managed to conceal his surprise and mortification whilst in his brother's room, but, on reaching his own apartments, he could not restrain the tears of rage which sprang to his eyes nor control his grief and contempt

as he related the whole affair to his confidential secretary. After Francesco's refusal to consider a second marriage, and the reasons he gave for that refusal, Ferdinando's apprehensions that he would marry Bianca had been allayed, and the discovery that what he feared had actually taken place came as a double shock. However, the deed was done and lamentations were useless. Useless also were reproaches, and realising that nothing would now induce Francesco to part with his Venetian, Ferdinando refrained from showing his bitter resentment, and merely offered his formal good wishes without adding to them remarks that might have further widened the breach between the brothers. His only consolation was in the reflection that perhaps the Florentines would be more easily appeased by the legalisation of the inevitable union; in any case it was more moral. Never for a moment did he imagine that Francesco would make her Grand Duchess; he took it for granted that he had married her privately as his father had married Cammilla Martelli, and thus he wrote to Serguidi:

'The Grand Duke hath married the Signora Bianca and purposes to acknowledge her publicly as his wife. It doth not follow, however, that she will be Grand Duchess; I think she will be like the Signora Cammilla.'

But for once Ferdinando underestimated the resources of his adversary. Unfortunately, Francesco de' Medici, lacking both in dignity and strength of mind, rarely imitated his father in his wise actions or knew where to draw the line in following him in his bad ones.

Directly Francesco appeared on the way to recovery Ferdinando returned to Rome, with the intention of now making his permanent home there, and fully determined that a very long time should elapse before he again set foot in Florence, where his brother's behaviour and the persons by whom he was surrounded only grieved and offended him, both as man, as cardinal, and as Medici.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DAUGHTER OF THE REPUBLIC

THE two months which had elapsed between Giovanna's death and her own marriage had been the most anxious, the most spirit-breaking of Bianca's whole life. She had triumphed certainly, but her triumph was not complete. She was the wife, but she must be the Grand Duchess too before she could reckon that end fully achieved for which she had longed and striven. She might consider her honour satisfied, but her ambition asked all Francesco had to give. She must still wait awhile, however, and the intervening months were utilised in preparing the ground for this ultimate step towards a throne.

So far she had always fought her own battles, but in this last and crowning effort she needed her family behind her, for it was no longer a mere personal question. So she wrote to her father and told him of the secret marriage which had taken place already some months previously, and which was still to be kept secret until the year of mourning was over, and claimed the help of him and her brother. Vettore came without delay and was received (privately, of course) with all cordiality by Francesco. Then began an organised attack upon the fixed determination of the Grand Duke, who exhibited no intention of raising Bianca to any position higher than that of wife. It was, however, carefully pointed out to him how this promotion would rehabilitate his consort in the eyes of Venice and all Italy, and would effectually efface all remembrance of her past imprudence, to put it politely. And in these suggestions, veiled and open, Vettore was backed up by the Archbishop of Florence, Alessandro de'

Medici, by the Bardi brothers, who had had so much to do with bringing about the marriage, by Serguidi, traitor in turn to both Francesco and Ferdinando, and in short by all at court who hoped to reap the reward of their servility by obtaining wealth or dignities through the favour of the new Grand Duchess.

Francesco listened to these suggestions and reflected. Apart from the scandal of his past relations with her, he was well aware that his marriage with a person who had fled from her native city in disgrace, the widow of a man of humble position on whose head a price had once been set, would be regarded with indignation and contempt by the other Italian princes, and indeed by all Europe. But he was wary and took no rash step. Vettore had hinted that the Venetian Republic might be induced to do again what had been done a century earlier in the case of Caterina Cornaro, who became Queen of Cyprus, and create his sister a Daughter of the Republic. This was a distinction invented by the Venetians to place them on a par with non-republican states and enable them to form royal alliances, and a lady on whom had been conferred this splendid title ranked as a daughter of the first power in Italy and took precedence of all other Italian princesses. If Venice would do this, Francesco's position would be secure, but he must be safeguarded first. So he wrote to Abbioso, the Florentine resident in Venice, to prepare the way, adding that Vettore was returning home immediately and would lend all the aid he could. Meanwhile Francesco determined to sound King Philip as to his opinion on the question of a marriage with Bianca, for the fact was still supposed to be known only to the few persons from whom it had been impossible to conceal it. He told Philip how, desiring to assure the succession by other sons than only the sickly Don Filippo, he had decided to wed Bianca Cappello, by whom he had already had one child (for he persisted in treating Antonio as his son in spite of Bianca's confession). He acknowledged the secret marriage, and said

that he was only waiting for His Majesty's approval to make it public at the end of the year.

Abbioso was wholly a creature of Bianca's, to whom he owed the position he held, and he threw himself heart and soul into her interests. Nor was his task a difficult one. Overjoyed at the sudden importance which he acquired through his daughter's second marriage, the splendour of which, he considered, wiped out all memory of her unfortunate first venture, Bartolommeo had carried Bianca's letter before the Fathers of the Republic, declaring the news to be a complete surprise to him, asserting that Francesco had surely been actuated chiefly by his respect for the Republic, and declaring himself, his son and daughter, eternally the Republic's grateful, humble servants. The Magnificent Fathers were not slow to perceive the advantages to be derived by careful diplomacy from such a connection. Prudence demanded, however, that the marriage should not be made generally known until the Grand Duke sent them official notice of it, therefore they bade the Cappello family keep the news to themselves. But this was asking too much of that vainglorious tribe, and the whole party, including the proud and once vindictive Patriarch of Aquileia, made the secret as open a one as possible, gave banquets in honour of their reflected grandeur, and promenaded the city attired in new robes of crimson silk as a sign of rejoicing.

On learning how the news had been received in Venice, Francesco decided to strike while the iron was hot and make the best bargain he could. He addressed a letter to the Doge in which, after alluding to the good relations which had always existed between the two cities and his ardent desire that they should endure, he stated that—

'. . . A year having elapsed since the death of the Grand Duchess, my consort of happy memory, of whom I had but one son, I have resolved to contract a second union in order the better to secure my succession. And although I could have allied myself with great princely houses, I have

preferred to become the kinsman of the Most August Republic, whose friendship I have ever appreciated; and I am persuaded, moreover, that a resolution which thus proves my respect for your Serenities will surely be greeted by you with gratitude. Desiring, therefore, to contract a marriage with one of the families of this most noble city, I have by God's aid taken to wife she whom I do know to agree entirely with my desires and who, by reason of her virtues, doth merit the honour of being adopted as a daughter of the Republic; and I shall, moreover, remember that through her I do myself become a son of that Republic. I do now, therefore, offer myself as such; and albeit I have always been as a son in respect and affection, there will now be an undeniable and irrefutable proof thereof upon all occasions.'

This worthy epistle was accompanied by an historical one from Bianca herself, which ran as follows:

'Seeing that it hath pleased God and the goodness of the Grand Duke to confer upon me the honour of taking me for his consort, as your Serenities will have learned from His Highness' letter and from the ambassador charged with delivering it unto you, I have been greatly rejoiced and comforted; not only because I have been raised to a position superior unto my private condition, but much more so because I have been united in marriage unto a prince who is as well disposed towards your Serene Dominion as could be any natural citizen of the Republic, in whose service His Highness will never spare either his power or his own life. And he hath shown his affection and respect for your Serenities chiefly in this, that he hath lent no ear unto the alliances proposed for him by other great princes, but hath taken me for his wife that he might have a Daughter of the Most Serene Republic, in order that by this blood-relationship the union with your Serenities might be closer and that he might have the more occasion to serve you. And when opportunity doth offer I am convinced that events will bear constant witness unto the truth of my words. And of this I am the more content, seeing that

good fortune hath never been desired by me for any other end than for the service of that happy Dominion whose ever grateful servant I am. And albeit I cannot promise to do in its service all that I should, yet do I assure it that I will do all that lieth in my power; which thing will be the more grateful unto me as I shall at the same time please myself, serve my country, and content the Grand Duke my Lord, who loveth the Republic even as I do myself. And thus showing myself attentive unto the one and the other, I shall fulfil the office of daughter unto your Serenities, of wife unto His Highness and of servant unto both, assuring you that fortune can never exalt me so high that I shall fail to humble myself with all due reverence unto your Serenities. For albeit His Highness hath deemed me worthy to be his consort, yet hath he not upon that account cancelled the debt I do owe unto mine own city. For although I do feel honoured by the title of wife, I do yet more pride myself upon being a true and not unworthy Daughter of the Republic; wherefore I do pray that it will graciously grant my request. Thus using all mine endeavour not to be undeserving, I do offer myself for the service of all and of each one of your Excellencies, as did my forefathers in their time, and my father and my brother will be no less ready to offer their lives for the preservation and service of that Republic, which I do pray God to exalt and preserve eternally.

'Written from Pratolino, the 10th June 1579.

'Bianca Cappello.'

Francesco chose as his ambassador extraordinary Mario Sforza, General of the Tuscan forces, and sent him to Venice with these two letters and the duty of formally announcing his marriage with Bianca Cappello to the Doge and Senate. Sforza reached Venetian territory on the 12th June and was received with great honour, forty senators going to meet him at Santa Maria delle Grazie. He was lodged in the new Palazzo Cappello, the Patriarch Grimani receiving

him at the door of the house clad in his prelate's robes. Two days later the forty senators fetched him in state for his first interview with the Doge and the letters from Florence were read and the resolution put to the vote, with the result that Bianca was eventually elected a Daughter of the Republic.

One important fact, however, did not escape the notice of the Venetian Senate, namely, that Bianca did not sign her letter with her husband's seal, and this threw a doubt on her real position. They knew that she was the Grand Duke's wife, but they had no proof that she would be Grand Duchess, and in this shrewd bargain they wanted to be sure that they were getting a fair price for the goods they had to dispose of. In other words, they wanted a guarantee that Francesco would wipe off the stain on their countrywoman's character by giving her his title before they granted his request and conferred upon her the one they had to bestow. Therefore to make the matter clear and to intimate to Francesco what was expected of him, Bianca was alluded to in the Doge's reply as Grand Duchess. It is by no means certain that Francesco had that idea in his mind when he married her; he probably only intended, in spite of Vettore and his representations, to declare her his wife without grand ducal rank, but his hand was forced by the Doge's letter, as it was intended it should be. Indeed no other course was left open to Francesco but to follow the lead given him, for the fact that Bianca had been elected Daughter of the Republic, and the honour shown his ambassador, practically tied his hands.

Immediately Bartolommeo and Vettore heard of the Senate's decision they presented themselves at the Palace, attired in gorgeous robes and escorted by a hundred of their kith and kin, and were created by the Doge 'Cavalieri,' or knights, with precedence over all other knights of the Republic. Then, after the inevitable banquet, Vettore set out that same night for Florence, that he might be the first to carry the news of her triumph to his sister and reap

whatever reward Francesco might bestow on the bringer of good news.

On the night of the Feast of Corpus Christi Vettore reached Florence and was immediately admitted to the apartments of Francesco and Bianca, who had been waiting with the utmost impatience to know how their letters had been received in Venice. When they heard that Sforza had met with a reception worthy of the ambassador of a king, and of the public rejoicings in Venice, their delight knew no bounds. Francesco felt that a load of apprehension had been lifted off his mind, and Bianca was filled with satisfied ambition and the knowledge that she had vindicated herself in the eyes of her own family and fellow-citizens, who had once despised her and who were now forced to pay her homage. The astute Vettore had gauged fairly accurately the character and credulity of his grand ducal brother-in-law and, hand-in-hand with his sister, he determined to make the most of the situation. He clearly gave Francesco to understand that the consent of the Venetian Senate had been won chiefly by the ambassador's declaration that he had not only married Bianca, but had every intention of creating her Grand Duchess; and further, that proofs and witnesses of the marriage must be produced. Eager to satisfy all requirements, Francesco instantly decided to repeat the ceremony in the presence of Vettore and responsible witnesses. And then and there, at two o'clock in the morning, Fra Masseo was summoned once more to the Pitti, together with the Papal Nuncio, the Prince of Piombino, Pandolfo de' Bardi, the Residents of Ferrara and Lucca and certain gentleman of the court, and in their presence Francesco de' Medici was again solemnly married to Bianca Cappello.

Although the first ceremony had never been formally divulged, it had become a matter of common belief amongst the people that Bianca had attained what had long been her apparent aim. King Philip's consent having meanwhile arrived, however, there was now no object, even had there

been a possibility, of keeping the secret any longer, and this same night, immediately after the marriage, Francesco himself informed his servants. Instantly the news spread like wildfire through the city and was received by the people with indignation, ribald jokes or contemptuous indifference, for their Grand Duke had long ceased to inspire them with any happier sentiments. Only those who hoped for personal benefits from the new Grand Duchess could rejoice, and their joy did not spring from the worthiest motives.

Outwardly, however, the city must conform to the requirements of the moment. On the following morning Francesco ordered the announcement of his marriage to be sent to all the princes of Italy, and he gave his ministers and councillors in Florence to understand that he expected them to do homage to the new Grand Duchess just as they would to himself. Nothing dared be left to the initiative of the city if Bianca was to be spared the disgrace of a silent or insulting reception from her new subjects. Fireworks and bonfires were ordered to be lighted in various parts of the city and on the top of the Cathedral cupola; the bells were rung and salutes were fired, and commands were sent to all the cities of the State of Tuscany to imitate the example of Florence in these matters, and also to send their ambassadors to do homage to Bianca, while a solemn mass of rejoicing was celebrated in the Cathedral.

Fortunately for the peace of the family, Cardinal Ferdinando and Don Pietro were absent from Florence at this moment and the other relatives raised no objections to carrying out the Grand Duke's commands. The youthful Don Giovanni de' Medici, Cosimo's son by Eleonora degli Albizzi and Francesco's half-brother, his uncle Don Luigi of Toledo, the Papal Nuncio and all the foreign ambassadors and residents made formal recognition of Bianca. And poor Giovanna's four children, the three little girls and the baby Filippo, were brought to her that they, too, might pay their respects to the new stepmother, though only the two elder were of an age to understand their loss, for Maria, the future

Queen of France, was but two years old when her mother died. Perhaps of all the city these poor children gave Bianca the sincerest welcome, for she was no stranger to them, and the charm that had enslaved the father had found no difficulty in winning the love of the innocent children too.

The next Sunday was fixed for the public recognition of Bianca as Grand Duchess, when the court and city and all the civic bodies were to pay homage. In the great hall of the Pitti Palace was erected a canopy used only on state occasions, and beneath this sat Bianca, her brother near her and young Don Giovanni standing bareheaded at her side. The chief councillors and magistrates headed the procession that defiled before the triumphant Venetian; they saluted not only her but also her most unworthy brother, and great must have been their rage at being forced to do this mean act. So wild was the confusion, so immense the concourse of people come to obey the Grand Duke's commands, that the ambassadors, archbishops, cardinals and other gentlemen were obliged to come another day to perform the ceremony of recognition. Then Bianca made a solemn progress through the city, alone in a coach with the little princesses, and Francesco followed her in another coach with his uncle, Luigi of Toledo, and the inevitable Vettore Cappello, and escorted by his guards and all the court on foot and who knows by what crowd of ragamuffins and grinning townsfolk. This strange procession halted before the church of the Annunziata and Bianca descended to hear her first mass as Grand Duchess of Tuscany, there in the very church where her predecessor had heard her last but a few hours before her death. And Francesco further improved the occasion by purchasing a marquisate in the kingdom of Naples for Antonio.

And when the Florentines awoke the next morning they found the city decorated at all its principal corners with a placard which read.

'Bianca is become Grand Duchess, in spite of our poor, wretched, deceived citizens.'

And a still worse notice was inscribed with the scurrilous verse,

'Il Gran Duca di Toscana
Ha sposata una puttana,
Gentildonna, Veneziana.'

And it was never discovered who had done this thing.

Philip of Spain had raised no difficulties over recognising Francesco's second marriage; indeed, when the Grand Duke represented it as a duty due to his conscience, the bigot king gave it his full approval. It was not so easy to announce the fact to the Emperor Rudolph, nephew of the Archduchess Giovanna, especially as he had expressed a wish that Francesco should take for his second wife a daughter of the Archduke Charles. However, Francesco smoothed away the difficulties that were raised by promising his second daughter, Anna, to the Marquis of Burgaw, son of the Archduke Ferdinand, who was glad to obtain for his son the protection and position in Italy which this marriage into a rich and powerful family would afford him; thus all parties were pleased and the old enemy pacified. The young Marquis of Burgaw and the Cardinal Andrew of Austria were the sons of the Archduke Ferdinand by a morganatic marriage and were consequently despised by the imperial family. The match never took place, however, for the Princess Anna died when barely fourteen years of age.

In all the little courts of Italy, but especially in those of Ferrara, Parma, Savoy and Mantua, Francesco's second marriage aroused the most severe and contemptuous criticism. The Pope, on the contrary, was pleased at the match, thinking that it would facilitate diplomatic relations between the states, but on attempting to congratulate the Cardinal Ferdinando on the event, he almost provoked a quarrel with that proud and justly indignant prelate.

Bianca had never succeeded in overcoming the private enmity of either Ferdinando or Pietro de' Medici. The latter had detested her from the beginning, but feigning friendship with her, had kept a keen watch on all her

doings, which he duly reported to his brother in Rome. He was a constant and welcome guest at her banquets and festivities, for it suited the plans of both that he should attend them, and he had thus established some sort of intimacy with her. But Bianca was too well acquainted with his relentless and sinister character to be taken in by his pretences, and though she feigned confidence in return for his feigned friendship, she was always on her guard.

Ferdinando, on the other hand, had never overstepped the bounds of cold conventionality in his intercourse with Bianca, and had found it hard to pretend a cordiality he did not feel. His grief at Francesco's marriage had been somewhat mitigated by the conviction that it was merely the payment of a moral debt, and that the title of wife was the only one she would bear; when, therefore, he learnt that she had been raised to the dignity of Grand Duchess he could not conceal his disgust and indignation.

His new sister-in-law had no intention, however, of submitting to his continued enmity. Don Pietro might go his ways and return to his duties in Spain for all she cared, but the Cardinal Ferdinando was a different sort of man and must be won at all costs. The one strong nature recognised the other, and Bianca was great enough to value and admire those very qualities of pride and integrity which she herself had sacrificed in pursuit of her dominating ambition. Had Ferdinando been Grand Duke at that time instead of Francesco, had he married Bianca under honourable conditions, what might not they two have achieved for the aggrandisement of Tuscany! Bianca knew herself hated, also she knew how immeasurably her position, both with the Grand Duke and the people, would be strengthened if she could make peace with the Cardinal. So she smothered her own feelings and presently wrote him a letter which it was impossible for him to ignore, or treat as he would have liked. He replied by sending to her and his brother merely the most conventional of congratulations on the honour of adoption by the Venetian Republic, and despatching a

messenger to Florence to repeat them verbally; and he accepted with dignified reserve the compliments and congratulations offered him in Rome, parrying with diplomatic tact the disguised gibes of his adversaries. Had his opinion ever for one moment wavered, which it never did, it would have been firmly fixed by something that happened now at this very time, when Bianca had reached the height of her success and triumph.

Ferdinando was well aware that Bianca had confessed to Francesco that she had palmed off a bought child on him as her own; but it chanced to be at this moment that his faithful friend and agent, the Piedmontese bishop Dal Pozzo, succeeded in discovering the written confession of Giovanna Santi, dictated on her deathbed and carefully preserved by the alarmed Bolognese authorities, who feared Francesco's anger and revenge. The precious document was forthwith sent to Ferdinando, and though it could be made no use of just now, it showed that he was right in his opinion of the lady and might prove an invaluable weapon in the future, should the right of succession to the throne of either his nephew, little Filippo, or of himself ever be disputed in favour of Antonio. The prudent cardinal realised that this would be the most inopportune of moments for making public such a damaging document; had it been found earlier, when Bianca was still only a private person, in spite of her own confession the crude details of the story might have been potent factors in preventing this marriage. But now she was Grand Duchess of Tuscany and it was useless at this juncture to fight against so powerful an adversary, whereas future events might perchance turn Santi's confession into a sword of justice.

Francesco had requested the Republic to delay sending ambassadors to Florence until all arrangements for the public celebration of the double event were complete, and meanwhile he despatched his young half-brother, Don Giovanni, to Venice to express his thanks to the Senate. This young gentleman was only twelve years old, but his

precocity and natural intelligence rendered him quite capable of undertaking the commission, under suitable guidance. He was met at Chioggia by a deputation from the Republic and conducted to the Palazzo Cappello, which served as a sort of free hotel for all Florentines sent to Venice on Bianca's business. This charming boy conducted himself so well that he won all hearts for his own sake. The Senate had authorised Vettore to entertain and amuse him at the public expense during the twelve days he stayed in Venice, and he went through such a series of excursions, banquets and sightseeings in the city as had surely never been provided for any happy boy before. It is not surprising that Master Giovanni was stopped at Padua on his way home by a severe feverish attack, which, however, proved to be chickenpox; but the Republic sent its best doctors to attend him, and he was restored to his brother safe and sound, the affectionate solicitude of the Republic requiring fresh expressions of gratitude from the Grand Duke.

CHAPTER XIX

THE GRAND DUCHESS

Bianca was now within measurable distance of the day which was to be the culminating point of her career, when she should be invested with the outward sign and seal of achieved ambition.

Whilst the preparations for the coronation ceremony were advancing apace in Florence, Francesco and Bianca went off for a little honeymoon, visiting Pistoja and a mountain castle Francesco possessed amid the high forests of Cutigliano. But that month of August was cold and windy; the summer sun seemed not to favour that ill-omened bridal pair, and the mountains all round, from the hills of Modena to La Vernia and Vallombrosa, were white with fresh-fallen snow, a thing never known before in those regions in the height of summer.

At last, by the middle of September, everything was ready. Bianca's relatives were already approaching the gates of Florence, and early on the morning of the 16th young Giovanni and Pellegrina Bentivoglio, with a numerous escort, rode out to meet the guests and bring them in state into the city. Old Bartolommeo, Vettore and his wife, the Patriarch of Aquileia, Bianca's uncle Morosini and her friendly cousins the two Cappello brothers had all come to share in the honours and pleasures in store; and when the long train entered the Porta San Gallo in the cool of the evening (the same gate through which Bianca herself had first entered Florence, a fugitive from these very relatives), it was received with salvoes of artillery from the forts and by a curious if cynical crowd, which accompanied it to the Pitti,

where Don Pietro waited in the courtyard to welcome the family of his brother's wife. Extraordinary, indeed, was the fuss made over the Venetians by Francesco and Bianca, and old Bartolommeo, considering the past and present, remarked that '*Non ci volevano che palle di quella sorta per lavare e cancellare si grande macchia.*' In the opinion of this worthy old man there was no stain so deep but that it could be wiped out by wealth and position.

The grand ducal pair had temporarily removed their residence to the Palazzo Vecchio in order that they might leave the Pitti free for the visitors, who were mostly lodged there, and also to be nearer the scene of the festivities. On the morning of the 28th arrived the two Venetian ambassadors, Giovanni Michele and Antonio Tiepolo and their train of nobles, and no such magnificent deputation had ever before been sent out by Venice to any prince. Like the previous arrivals, they were met outside the city by Francesco's brothers and greeted by salutes as they entered; they too were lodged in the Pitti, which was now so full that dinner was served at twelve large tables, and almost as many dined at the Palazzo Vecchio, where many of the suites had been accommodated. The public audience was delayed three days because something had happened to one of the baggage mules and the most noble Tiepolo's best clothes had not turned up, but on the Thursday he was able to appear in the missing property and make his speech as representative of the Venetian Republic. The great hall was so packed with people that neither Tiepolo's speech nor Francesco's reply could be heard by any except those close to them, but every one could perceive that the Grand Duke was all smiles and courtesy as he stepped from his seat to meet the ambassadors. After dinner they were received by the Grand Duchess and presented her with the Republic's wedding gift, a magnificent necklace of diamonds. Bianca's delight at this splendid present was great and unfeigned, not alone on account of the value of the stones, but because

Photo Brogi

THE GAME OF FOOTBALL BEING PLAYED IN THE PIAZZA SANTA MARIA NOVELLA, FLORENCE, ON AN OCCASION OF PUBLIC FESTIVITY

From a contemporary fresco in the Palazzo Vecchio

they counterbalanced, as it were, that warrant for her arrest issued by the donors sixteen years before.

Francesco had determined that the double ceremony of Bianca's coronation as Grand Duchess of Tuscany and as Daughter of the Venetian Republic should be performed with the utmost splendour; and in his eagerness to please the Republic and his request for official recognition for his bride, the Venetians had seen a fine opportunity for assuming the direction of the whole affair and demonstrating their power over him. And they had first of all desired that the marriage ceremony should be repeated publicly at the time of the coronation, in order that Bianca might appear in no way inferior to the other two Daughters of the Republic, one of whom had married the King of Hungary and the other the King of Cyprus, and to this Francesco willingly consented.

Before the ceremony began, however, an unforeseen difficulty arose, which threatened to put a stop to the proceedings altogether. In order to show the world that he was not espousing any obscure lady of no importance, and to stop the mouths of the sneerers, Francesco (seconded in his request by his ambitious consort) had begged the Venetian ambassadors themselves to crown Bianca with the grand ducal crown as a sign that they recognised her as a 'true and particular daughter of the Republic.' But at the last moment the Papal Nuncio raised violent objections, asserting that the Apostolic See alone had the right to crown sovereigns. And in order to pacify the tiresome prelate it was necessary for the Grand Duke and the ambassadors to declare solemnly that the latter were only performing the ceremony as a sign that Bianca was not ascending the throne of Tuscany as merely a simple Venetian, but as a Daughter of the Most Serene Republic, to which honour she had been elected in recognition of her marriage to the Grand Duke and her elevation to the rank of Grand Duchess; and that they were not crowning her as Grand Duchess of Tuscany, therefore not in any way infringing the Papal

rights. This somewhat involved explanation being clearly understood, the Nuncio acquiesced in the arrangement and consented to be present at the ceremony.

On this Monday morning, the 12th October 1579, all Florence was early astir to see as much as possible of the gorgeous doings; for whatever might be the people's opinion of their ruler and his bride, no true Florentine would miss the opportunity of enjoying a free spectacle and merry-making, however provided!

In the great Hall of the Senate in the Palazzo Vecchio was erected a magnificent canopy of brocade, beneath which were placed five chairs of state. Opposite this was a double semicircle of benches, and the whole hall was hung with valuable tapestries and cloth of silk and gold. The Grand Duke appeared with the Nuncio and the other ambassadors in Florence, all clad in robes of state, and followed by the councillors and the Senate of the Forty-Eight, the Podestà and other magistrates, who filled the benches, while the Grand Duke himself occupied the centre seat under the canopy, with the Nuncio on his right hand. The people were admitted freely to the hall, which was crammed to overflowing. The Grand Duchess, dressed in regal robes, entered walking between the two Venetian ambassadors, they having fetched her from her apartments and escorted her to the hall. With her came her father and brother and all her kindred, together with the other Venetians and twenty-five noble ladies wearing splendid dresses and jewels. She took her place on the Grand Duke's left and the ambassadors occupied the remaining chairs under the canopy.

Then in his own palace, and with all due pomp and solemnity, Francesco was married to Bianca for the third time. The Patriarch of Aquileia, her old enemy, to whom the Metropolitan of Florence had ceded this honour, pronounced a brief discourse, and Francesco placed the ring on her finger and kissed her in sight of all the people. Immediately afterwards the Secretary of Council, Paolo Vinta, read aloud the

proclamation of the Venetian Senate declaring her Daughter of the Republic; then the two ambassadors rose and advanced, and Tiepolo as the senior took the grand ducal crown from a golden basin, presented to him by a gentleman of the court, and placed it on Bianca's head with due formula, and at the same moment, on a given signal, a salvo of artillery was fired from a neighbouring square.

Thus crowned and wedded, Bianca proceeded in great pomp to the Cathedral to hear mass, after which she returned in the same splendid state to the Palace, carried in a sort of gorgeous litter, the two Venetian ambassadors riding on either side of her, as though demonstrating to the end of the performance the superior rights of that state over the bride of the day.

Throughout all these lengthy ceremonies Bianca showed herself ever smiling and gracious, alert to please and gentle to all, so that not even the most implacable of her enemies could find fault with her demeanour on this day when the eyes of all the city were turned critically upon her. Her faithful cousin and friend, Andrea Cappello, was a witness of her triumph and wrote down carefully many of the wonderful things he saw in Florence on this occasion of his family's glorification.

The festivities in Florence in honour of the marriage and for the amusement of the visitors were on a sumptuous scale and very varied. There were banquets, dances, hunting parties at Pratolino and Poggio a Cajano, and the famous game of the 'Carosello' was played in the Piazza di Santa Croce, Francesco himself taking part in it and showing himself to be an expert rider and performer. There was also a bull fight, in which six beasts were killed, and a tournament which afforded an exhibition of much skill on the parts of both riders and steeds.

The most splendid and original of all these entertainments, and one which was remembered as a wonder even for these times of wonderful entertainments, took place on the night of the 14th October in the beautiful courtyard of the Pitti

Palace, which had been temporarily roofed in for the occasion. From this roof hung thirty figures of angels, each bearing a lily in his left hand and a hanging lamp in his right; alternating with the angels hung thirty blue vases holding lights, and festoons of silver and gold and garlands of flowers and other decorations innumerable made the scene one which even the journalists of the day despaired of adequately describing. When night fell and the great courtyard was lighted up by these countless wax candles and oil lamps, it almost seemed as though day had suddenly returned, so bright it all was. Then, to the sound of music, a great curtain which had been drawn across the southern side of the square fell and disclosed a wide grotto, within which was seen a representation of the sea and the proud city of Venice. From out this mimic city there then issued a procession of richly dressed knights and pages, bearing helmets, lances and shields, and followed by a wonderful ivory car drawn by two Indian elephants and blazing with lights, even to the wheels. On this car, on a raised and gilded seat, were three magnificent Persian knights, represented by the Grand Duke, his brother Don Pietro and Mario Sforza. Having made the tour of the courtyard, they descended from their car and proclaimed that, having heard in their own country of the marriage of their Serene Highnesses, they had in honour thereof come to uphold with lance and sword the superiority of the bride in beauty, grace and virtue. Thereupon a great display of other cars and allegorical figures entered the courtyard and defiled before the Grand Duchess and the ambassadors; there were the cars of the Sun, of Venus and Cupid, of Mars, the Trojan Horse, Night, a Ship, Mount Etna, and many others, and the attendant knights and beauties showed homage to the Grand Duchess by feats of arms, musical performances and in various other ways. Venus related how she had called the fair Bianca from the shores of the Adriatic; how on her arrival on Arno's banks the winged boy Cupid had hidden himself in her eyes and thence wounded the Prince

with his arrows, and how Hymen had now joined them, to the general delight. The goddess called upon two warriors to uphold the honour of the bride, and mounting her car with Cupid, she was drawn round the courtyard, this being supposed to represent a flight to Etruria, and then alighted in front of the Grand Duchess, and, as a mark of her favour, presented her with the golden apple once bestowed by Paris on herself.

The magnificent entertainment, the like of which had never been seen before, lasted five or six hours, and notwithstanding the immense number of persons assembled to see it and the great quantity and variety of fireworks, all passed off without mishap of any kind. The townspeople were certainly excluded from the Pitti grounds that night, an unusual but wise order, but nevertheless the entertainment was witnessed by over ten thousand persons.

'And a fine thing it was to see,' wrote Simone Fortuna to the Duke of Urbino on the 19th October, 'how the Grand Duke did take part in everything and, with infinite courtesy, did see that each person was well accommodated, and in all knightly exercises he did bear himself very bravely and gracefully. And on Thursday morning, feigning to be in no way fatigued, after having attended to his business in the Casino he went to the Pitti to dine with the ambassadors, and at the public festival and banquet offered unto all the ladies of the city, he danced before supper until six o'clock and after supper until twelve. And the ambassadors also did take part in this, and also these Monsignori, and even the Patriarch himself when he was invited to dance went most courteously. And it appeareth that they are all most well content with all that hath been done in their honour.'

The Venetian ambassadors remained in Florence three weeks and on his departure each received a valuable ring from the Grand Duchess and a jewelled chain worth a thousand ducats from the Grand Duke. These gifts, however, were confiscated by the Senate when the recipients exhibited them, according to custom, on their return home,

and in spite of all requests and objections on the part of the owners, the jewels were locked up in the Treasury of St. Mark. The Republic was wont to show its displeasurē with its messengers by annexing the gifts bestowed on them, but it seems uncertain in what particular way these two had offended, unless by giving way to the Papal Nuncio.

The ambassadors' secretary also received a valuable chain; the Patriarch Grimani was presented with a jewelled cross and bed-covers and fine linen of great beauty and value, besides sweetmeats of all kinds, and the other Venetians also departed all considerably richer than when they arrived. When one reflects that these valuable gifts, the maintaining of so many guests for three weeks or more, and all other expenses cost some three hundred thousand ducats, it must be acknowledged that in the celebration of his second marriage Francesco showed himself a true Medici, without a trace of his natural avarice. But by reason of grave disasters which had happened, and a scarcity of food which caused suffering to the poor throughout Tuscany, this prodigality in the matter of his own glorification was not admired by his people, especially as the city of Florence itself had been put to great expenses over the festivities.

On Bianca Francesco settled a dowry of one hundred thousand gold ducats. Bartolommeo remained a few weeks longer in Florence and when he eventually took his departure he carried with him a generous sum of money and the assurance of a yearly pension for life. Vettore was also endowed with a pension, to be settled on his heirs male, and a dowry for his eldest daughter. But the wary Vettore, with an eye to the main chance, decided not to quit this land of golden promise, but to take up his residence for good near his sister and her convenient husband. The horde of minor Cappello relatives, however, returned to their own city, rich in spoil and congratulating themselves heartily on the excellent manner in which the family beauty had atoned for her first unfortunate matrimonial mistake.

Venice's policy throughout the whole affair was much more far-seeing than was at first apparent. In spite of the decline of her power, she had laid her plans for extending her dominion in Italy and kept a sharp look-out for anything that might further her designs. The union of a Grand Duke of Tuscany with a Venetian patrician, who had been raised to the dignity of Daughter of the Republic, rendered it much easier for them to carry on their operations in all the Tuscan dominions. The Grand Duke had become a Son of the Republic, and this was no mere empty title. A son, according to Venetian ideas, was bound to obey the wishes of the mother and regard her interests as his own.

For this reason Venice sought to make her influence felt at Bianca's coronation and to dominate the ceremony in the persons of her ambassadors. Francesco was so gratified by the honours shown to his wife, his brother and Sforza that he was ready to let the Venetians do what they liked, without much considering the consequences of his compliance. Such peaceful victories as these did more towards widening Venice's power than all her battles; such an event gave her the possession of Cyprus for a time through Caterina Cornaro, and now she hoped, through another Daughter of the Republic, to obtain a footing in Tuscany.

Francesco's compliance, however, was not wholly due to gratified pride; he had a more solid reason as well for thus yielding to another state.

Almost all the other Italian princes were his secret or declared enemies, and these little powers neglected no opportunity of injuring him. His chief concern, however, was the enmity of the powerful Farnese in Rome; these had always been adversaries of his House, and were especially irritated because Cosimo's opposition had been the cause why a cardinal of this family had not been elected Pope. France was against him because he had refused a loan, and also because the Queen, Catherine de' Medici, considered he usurped rights which were hers as descendant of the elder branch of the Medici family, and all who fled from him,

including Troilo Orsini, his sister's lover, had found a refuge in France. Philip II. of Spain treated him almost as a vassal and claimed rights over his army and exchequer oppressive for the land, and his friendship would only last as long as the sums expected were forthcoming. Francesco needed, therefore, an ally near at hand; the Venetians at that time were the first power in Italy, and he might now reasonably expect that they would take his side against his enemies.

There was also another way in which Francesco hoped to reap advantage from his friendship with Venice. In 1562 Cosimo had founded the great Order of San Stefano for the protection of Italy against the Turks, but since his abdication it had been almost wholly inactive. Francesco had this order very much at heart, and as he wished to revive its activity there was no power in Italy who could more favour his designs than Venice, her frequent wars making it very probable that she would support his enterprises and her wide lagoons affording excellent shelter for his galleys.

CHAPTER XX

FRATERNAL RELATIONS

Bianca had triumphed entirely. She had reached her goal; the position she had coveted was hers. But though she had ascended the throne of Tuscany, she knew very well that it would need all her tact and cleverness, the straining of every nerve, the abnegation of all private personal likes and dislikes and the exercise of the utmost caution to maintain her seat thereon.

From the Florentine nobles who frequented her court Bianca had little to fear; many had been on her side from the first, and those who regarded her with aversion and cherished the memory of the gentle and charitable Giovanna must be won by slow degrees. But the second Grand Duchess knew that gratified ambition and love of money are potent means of winning even the most obstinate. With respect to the common people, though too clever to despise their good-will, she shared the opinion of the times; give them plenty to eat and plenty of amusement and they would ask nothing more; they were but human animals from whom she anticipated no difficulty once she had a free hand with them.

Far more troublesome was the question of the Italian and foreign powers. The Italian princes had thrown public scorn on the marriage and greatly injured Francesco's reputation. But although she herself was the most offended in the matter, she hid her resentment and persuaded Francesco to treat the insults with indifference and disdain. She would see that they were avenged in due time!

The most pressing matter was to overcome the hostility of

her two brothers-in-law and to effect a reconciliation between them and Francesco, especially as the relations between the three brothers had been more strained than ever since Francesco's second marriage. For family reasons the elevation of Bianca to the position of Grand Duchess had been a severe blow to Ferdinando, and now the additional consideration of unpleasantness with other powers had to be faced, as well as a serious menace to his own rights.

At present Francesco's heir was Don Filippo, a little child so fragile that it seemed impossible he could survive his father, and the Cardinal himself was the next heir. Bianca's elevation placed his succession in danger, for as yet it was by no means certain that she might not have another child, who would naturally have prior rights to the throne in the event of Filippo's death. And in any case, he knew of what Bianca was capable; he knew that she had successfully deceived his brother once and what guarantee had he that, now when she could do it so much more easily, she would not repeat the trick in a manner impossible to prevent or expose? His disgust at the situation was so deep that the usually reserved and cautious Cardinal found himself for the time unable to feign satisfaction or even indifference; he alleged unavoidable engagements in Rome as a reason for not attending the coronation, merely sending one of his gentlemen as representative, and he was not to be persuaded to thank the Venetian Senate for the honour shown to his House, saying that Francesco had thanked sufficiently in the name of all the family, of which he was a member. His displeasure was so unconcealed that, when the Venetian ambassador in Rome offered him his congratulations, he replied that even the name of Daughter of the Republic conferred on Bianca did not compensate, in his opinion, for the disaster of the marriage. Knowing the hollowness of the excuses for absence, Francesco took offence and broke off all relations with his brother, Ferdinando on his side determining never to visit Florence again; and so the breach seemed complete.

Although Francesco really regretted the split with Ferdinando, he found ample compensation in the departure from Italy of Don Pietro, whose presence was an actual danger to the peace of the state. He was commander of the infantry troops which had been raised in Tuscany to assist King Philip in his claims on the throne of Portugal, vacant on the death of its king, and distinguished himself well as a soldier. He had behaved decently during the wedding festivities, as Francesco had advanced him considerable sums in advance of his pay, and he left again in November for Spain. But this brought further trouble on Francesco, for the Venetians now perceived that he had associated them with his domestic interests alone and was not with them politically; the Republic was obliged to keep up relations with France and could not therefore side with Spain, and Spain, on the other hand, viewed with displeasure Francesco's close relations with Venice.

The family split was utilised by the other Italian princes as an opportune weapon against the Medici, whom they all envied and hated. Not only was the new Grand Duchess made the subject of jest and mockery throughout all Italy, but the dukes of Savoy, Ferrara, Parma and Mantua formed a regular league against Francesco and strengthened it by intermarriage. Early in this year the Duke of Ferrara had married the Princess Margherita of Mantua, and now an alliance was openly contemplated between Don Vincenzo of Mantua and the Princess of Parma. This projected connection was really a deliberate insult to Francesco, for only a short time before the Duke of Mantua had asked for the hand of Francesco's eldest daughter, Eleonora, for his son, and the negotiations had not yet been broken off. Full of indignation, Francesco demanded a decisive answer from the Gonzaga family, and the Duke replied:

'I have never had any great inclination for this marriage, and now hath the character of the new Grand Duchess under whose care the Princesses live in Florence, so increased my objection that it cannot be overcome. More-

over, my son hath but little taste for the alliance, and I do not find therein the advantages I look for.'

An insult like this showed only too plainly that the once magic name of Medici had now become a byword for jest and contempt. The best way to win back its lost esteem was a speedy reconciliation with the Cardinal Ferdinando, and Bianca undertook to effect this. She had forced her way into the Medici family, but having become an indisputable member of it, she showed immediately that she had its interests genuinely at heart and was ready to bear her share of difficult duties.

Although she had perfectly understood Ferdinando's pretence of being detained in Rome at the time of her coronation, she feigned to believe the excuse, and both wrote letters and sent messengers expressing her regret at his absence and placing herself at his service in any way he pleased. She now began to persuade Francesco into a more friendly state of mind, pointing out how disastrous it was to the family dignity and welfare to be at enmity with the next most important member, and how much wiser he would be if he occasionally consulted his brother (who, after all, had a rightful interest in Tuscany) in the conduct of state affairs, and also obliged him in private requests for loans. Gradually she won over Francesco to share her views, for he was by no means bad at heart or devoid of natural affections; and Ferdinando, who had seen the evil consequences of family discord and was ever ready to sacrifice personal feelings for the good of the House, let it be known that he was ready to meet his brother half way as soon as he was assured of his good intentions.

The overcoming of Ferdinando's dislike to herself was a harder task; but the more Francesco showed bitterness, the more Bianca strove to be obliging and friendly, and there was one weak spot where she found she could touch her brother-in-law. He was a man who loved display, deeming it due to his position and family, and his income did not suffice for the splendour of the life he led in Rome. He was

in debt to Roman and Florentine bankers to the extent of 20,000 gold ducats and had asked Francesco to lend him that sum for two years to escape from the extortions of the usurers, giving as security part of the Tuscan property left him by his father. But Francesco had refused. This financial embarrassment proved to be Bianca's opportunity, and she let the Cardinal's confidential secretary, Messer Piero Usimbardi, know that she was both able and willing to obtain the loan for his master if he so desired.

This Usimbardi was extremely useful to Bianca in the way of furnishing hints and advice in her dealings with the Cardinal, and she maintained relations with him through her own private secretary, the Abbate Baccio Giovannini of Terranova, who was his great friend. Giovannini was of humble birth and had been groom to Messer Bartolommeo Concini, the famous secretary of Cosimo I. Having won his master's favour by his intelligence and good behaviour, he was educated, made a priest and taught the duties of a secretary of state by Concini, and his first post was that of secretary to Giovanna of Austria. Knowing his honesty and discretion, Bianca retained him in the same capacity for herself, and both she and Ferdinando looked upon the friendship existing between Giovannini and Usimbardi as a great advantage, each reckoning on thus obtaining knowledge of the secrets of the other household in Florence or Rome, as the case might be. But they both reckoned without their hosts, for the two secretaries were honest men, who knew how to keep their own counsel and their masters' secrets even with their own friends and resolutely refrained from mixing in intrigues of any description. And therefore if Usimbardi hinted at any special course of action, it might safely be assumed that the course suggested could be followed with safety.

Prompted by Usimbardi, then, and as a test of the genuineness of Bianca's expressed willingness to serve him, Ferdinando at length deigned to reply to her letters and accepted her offer to obtain the loan from her husband. Bianca

succeeded, of course, and the money was immediately despatched to Rome.

Ferdinando now perceived that it would be to his own interests, as well as to those of the family generally, to make friends, at least outwardly, with a person who had such useful influence over his brother, and whose rights, moreover, none could now dispute, and Bianca on her side neglected no opportunity of courting his good-will.

'I am very sick,' she wrote to him on one occasion; 'pray for me, for I know that God heareth your prayers.'

Flattery of this kind and signs of respect manifested at the right moment often produce greater effect even than services rendered, and did much to win Ferdinando's temporary toleration for Bianca. She was a past-mistress in the arts of cajolery and conciliation, and seldom failed in achieving her purpose when she applied herself to winning over an enemy and making a friend. Her victory in this case was unexpected and brilliant; but it was an apparent victory only, deliberately ceded by the adversary, and the Cardinal's own private opinion and deeply-rooted distrust of his beautiful sister-in-law never wavered for a single instant.

A formal reconciliation now followed as a matter of course, and the brothers, generally employing Bianca as intermediary, agreed officially and politically, and at last, in the October of 1580, Ferdinando once more paid a visit to Florence to effect the personal reconciliation still necessary. He went direct to his own villa at Ambrogiana, on the Pisa road near Monte Lupo, a square building with towers at the four corners, which he had erected on the foundations of an ancient country house which had belonged to the now extinct family of the Ardinghelli. The day after his arrival, Francesco, who was staying for the hunting at Poggio a Cajano with Bianca, went to see him and the meeting was most courteous and cordial. Ferdinando then visited Bianca, and the reception accorded him in the Grand Duke's house speedily dissipated all remaining clouds of ill-will. He was included in Francesco's most secret

councils and nothing of importance was decided without his advice and consent.

This reconciliation had all the results for which Bianca had hoped. Francesco's enemies, who had looked on his second marriage as an insurmountable barrier between him and Ferdinando and had schemed thereby to work his downfall, were surprised to see the three upon excellent terms, and to find that upon his return to Rome, Ferdinando set to work to win over the hostile cardinals and to thwart his brother's enemies. And successfully, too, for presently the league of princes was dissolved and the name of Medici regained something of its former standing and respect.

This peace-making was a triumph for Bianca and her position in the family was thereby assured, Ferdinando trusting to her knowledge of the side on which her bread was so thickly buttered to keep the peace now established. The danger from this quarter over, she next turned her attention to overcoming the contempt and hostility of the Florentines generally. But this hostility was not to be overcome. That one whose private life had been so questionable, who had been the cause of misery to the favourite Giovanna, should reign over them was a matter for deep resentment with the Florentines, and although they welcomed the family unity as a fact, it galled them that Bianca should have engineered it. They compared Francesco's extravagance for her with his meanness towards his first wife and his brothers, and especially did they resent the huge sums spent on the villa of Pratolino, where Bianca passed most of her time.

The people gave the Grand Duke the nickname of 'Tribolino,' and countless tales of cruelty and oppression were circulated amongst the malcontents. Of course Bianca was called a witch by the superstition of the time, and to the misdeeds she had actually committed the imagination of the people added numberless others of indescribable natures. Weird ceremonies and horrid orgies were supposed to take place in the shady avenues and spacious rooms of Pratolino,

and long after her death they used to point out a chamber in the villa which they called 'Il Stillatojo di Bianca,' where little children were supposed to have been killed and their bodies boiled that cosmetics might be made of them wherewith to anoint the Grand Duchess's fair white skin.

To the popular belief in her powers of sorcery Bianca herself lent colouring by her fondness for soothsayers and fortune-tellers, her interest in astrology and occult sciences of all kinds, as well as the more childish amusement of devising mechanical toys with which she often astonished her guests and alarmed the common folk. Moreover, she had adopted Francesco's taste for the study of natural science, and in that strange inner room of his in the Palazzo Vecchio, into which the light of day never penetrated, she watched his experiments and pored with him over books of science and medicine, toxicology and necromancy, in which the Medici became ever more absorbed as his character warped and darkened with years of suspicion and passion.

This 'studiolo' of Francesco's had been arranged according to his own ideas some years previously, as a secret refuge where he could be secure from interruption or eavesdroppers. It was on the first floor, communicating directly with Francesco's own apartments and also with the street, so that he could leave and enter the Palace unperceived; out of it a short staircase led up into the 'Treasury,' a tiny space whose walls were entirely lined with massive cupboards, behind which the family treasures reposed in safety under the very eyes of the owners. Small as it was, Francesco's study took three years to complete, for the best artists and sculptors of the day had contributed to make it a place of perfect beauty for the repose of the Medici eye and soul, and the paintings were all allusions to the subjects in which Francesco took the most interest. The lower portions of the walls were cupboards where he kept the machines and materials for his investigations, the twenty doors being painted with scenes from ancient history in oval panels, whilst on the upper portion were pictures representing pearl-

and whale-fishing, the origin of coral and amber, wool-combing, the invention of gunpowder, iron-founding, glass-making, alchemy, and other kindred subjects. The statues which filled the niches represented gods and goddesses of Olympia, and at either end of the room, in the semicircle of the curved ceiling, were portraits by Bronzino of Francesco's parents, the one of Duchess Eleonora being the loveliest ever painted of her and showing her in all the soft beauty of youth, ere her face had assumed the austerity of her later pictures.

This year of 1580, Bianca's first year as Grand Duchess, was full of disasters for her adopted land. To be sure it opened hopefully enough, for on the 1st of February the saintly Cardinal Carlo Borrommeo, Archbishop of Milan, came to Florence and spent the three days of his stay here in saying masses and holding religious processions through the city. One might have thought that the presence and example of this holy man would have averted trouble and restrained ill-doing, yet so slack did the Florentine ecclesiastics become that both at the Cathedral and the church of the Annunziata the canons and priests had to be recalled to their duties by threats of fines and punishments. In this same month a great galley built by Cosimo was wrecked near Naples, with the loss of ninety lives and many guns; it was a galley 'as big as a castle,' and reckoned the finest ship that sailed the seas in those days. But worse than this, a mysterious epidemic which had raged already in northern Italy made its appearance in Florence in the beginning of July and claimed great numbers of victims; Francesco himself was attacked, but recovered after being in danger four days. It was a strange malady which puzzled the doctors, beginning with pains in the head, sleeplessness, and sometimes fever, and ending in convulsions and delirium, while the patient was so weak as to be incapable of the least movement. By a fortunate dispensation of Providence, the physicians judged bleeding to be highly injurious in this particular malady, otherwise the mortality might have been very much greater.

These miseries were largely intensified by the scarcity of food in Tuscany, caused by two successive years of bad harvests, and even the relief measures undertaken by the Office of the Abbondanza (controlling the sale of food-stuffs in the city) could not keep the people's discontent from loud and bitter expression. They grumbled at government and Prince alike, for, to provide for his own lavish expenditure and to obtain the supplies of money regularly sent to King Philip, Francesco permitted his ministers to increase the taxes and gate-dues to a degree of absolute oppression. This dissatisfaction was further aggravated by sudden changes in the court and ministry. Mario Sforza and Pandolfo de' Bardi, both of whom had done so much towards helping Bianca to her present position, friends of the Grand Duke and dispensers of his favours to the people, and the least disliked of all the court party, were suddenly deposed from power and removed upon one pretext or another. Either the burden of gratitude weighed too heavily on Bianca, or her brother Vettore found their influence over Francesco inconvenient for his own plans and devised underhand means to remove them; but however they fell out of favour, they were exiled from court and Vettore stepped into their vacant places.

Vettore Cappello was a rascal of no common ability and with powers of resource almost equal to his sister's. He had speedily wormed his way into Francesco's confidence and his wife had been appointed Bianca's first lady-in-waiting. Puffed up with vanity, he presumed on his relationship to Bianca, and, like a second Piero Bonaventuri, he not only treated the Florentine nobles and ministers with insufferable impertinence, but even forgot the respect and gratitude he owed to the Grand Duke and took upon himself to decide matters in which he had no right to interfere. His chief object being to enrich himself by direct or indirect methods, he gave or sold the Grand Duke's favours often to the most unworthy; he pardoned criminals without Francesco's knowledge, and extorted money from the people by all sorts of devices. Gradually nearly all the state business came to

pass through Vettore's hands; Francesco had even committed the folly of allowing him to contract for large quantities of grain and oil in Tuscany, and when the economic condition of the country at that moment is considered, it will be seen what ruin he was able to cause. Vettore's assistant in these malpractices was a Minorite friar named Fra Geremia of Udine, formerly a spy in Francesco's pay (and in the pay of others also), and the two soon became the plague of Tuscany, so that the people clamoured for their removal and hated Vettore as much or even more than they hated his sister.

The popular wish was soon fulfilled. Like Bonaventuri, Vettore only required rope enough to hang himself. His vanity and presumption roused even his sister's indignation and anger, for presently he tried to make mischief in the family circle itself in order to get rid of his niece Pellegrina and her husband, who were much in Florence, and to put his own wife and children in their places. These manœuvres at last opened Bianca's eyes and she determined that he must be sent back to Venice, the illness of old Bartolommeo furnishing a convenient excuse to the public for the departure of her brother. But Vettore refused to go and a coolness ensued, the grand ducal displeasure being now made significantly plain. Sometimes he was ten days without being summoned to the presence of the sovereigns, a fact which he attempted in vain to conceal or explain, for the courtiers saw through it all and rejoiced in his discomfiture. At last, however, a crowning misdeed came to light and finally relieved Florence of his detested society.

Vettore had begged the Grand Duke for the loan of three thousand scudi, which request was granted; but, adding forgery to his other achievements, the Grand Duchess's brother altered the sum to thirty thousand. On the order being presented for payment, the keeper of the Treasury was so surprised at the large amount that he took the draft to Francesco himself for confirmation before cashing it. It was a day in September 1581, and Francesco had been to

Prato and had joined Bianca at Poggio a Cajano for supper. Hither came Serguidi, the direct discoverer of Vettore's misdeeds, and Abbioso, who had been sent for from Venice to assist in the tracing of several large sums of money sent by Bianca to her brother at earlier periods. Peremptorily summoned, Vettore arrived in his coach from Florence and was confronted with the proof of his forgery, which he denied to the treasurer's face; whereupon, justly incensed and seeing what manner of man his brother-in-law was, Francesco dismissed him from his service and bade him quit Florence within three days. Fra Geremia was turned out together with his friend and promptly took to flight.

Bianca approved of Francesco's decision and allowed no mercy to be shown; now she was a Medici, and the Cappello brood took second place with her! In spite of orders, however, Vettore still dawdled; he was in evil odour in Venice and postponed his departure from Florence as long as he dared on one excuse or another, the illness of his wife or some other invention. Finally he left towards the end of October, in the pouring rain, and with none but grinning servants to see him and his family off from the city where they had arrived in such triumph. The gate officials spitefully tried to make him pay duty for things he was carrying away with him, but there came an order from the Grand Duke that he was not to be taxed and that his property was to be transported free of cost for him as far as Bologna, so he got off better than he deserved.

The country did not gain much, however, by the dismissal of these two, for Vettore's forfeited place was given to Abbioso, who had been Florentine resident in Venice during the negotiations for Bianca's election as Daughter of the Republic, and his skill in conducting matters on that occasion was now rewarded. Serguidi was appointed as his colleague, a man never known to serve any master faithfully. And so, although the names of the oppressors were changed, the same oppression still weighed upon the land, and Bianca, to whom all misfortunes were now popularly attributed, was hated worse than ever.

Photo Brogi

FRANCESCO I. DE' MEDICI, GRAND DUKE OF TUSCANY
(in later life)
From a portrait by Paul Veronese in the Pitti Palace

CHAPTER XXI

THE HEIR

On his return to Venice, Vettore was roundly abused by the Senate for having behaved so indiscreetly as to lose his place at the Florentine court, where he had been a useful spy. He was furious, and, like all of his sort, tried to revenge himself on his brother-in-law by spreading false reports of all kinds. He found ready listeners, in spite of his own character, for not only did the Venetians resent such treatment of one of their patricians (although they might reprimand him themselves), but with Vettore's departure they saw the main connection severed through which they had hoped to exercise ever-increasing influence on Tuscan affairs. Already they perceived that Bianca was no longer their tool.

The relations between Florence and Venice had soon begun to show signs that the ardent friendship was more outward than real. The Venetians had hoped to get a footing in Tuscany, and therefore they had been willing, against their own laws, to allow Vettore Cappello to remain at the Florentine court, because he could thus keep them informed of what was going on there. They soon realised, however, that Francesco looked upon his new title of Son of the Republic as a purely domestic relation, and had not the faintest intention of giving them any voice in the management of his state.

The displeasure of the Venetians was further increased by Francesco's constant friendship with the King of Spain, and as the best way of sowing dissension between the allies, they hit on the plan of privately and adroitly rousing Philip's

jealousy of Francesco's friendship with themselves. But although Philip fell into the trap sufficiently to grow very suspicious of the intimate understanding apparently existing between his own ally and a state which always took the side of France and had never been favourable to Spain, Francesco managed to clear himself of any thought of double-dealing, and Venice's attempts at sowing discord fell through.

Bianca's anger at these underhand transactions was great, and she only waited for an opportunity of paying her native city out for its attempted treachery. The opportunity came in that same year of 1582, and enabled her at the same time to work off a private grudge.

The Duke of Ferrara, one of the Medici's old enemies, had proposed a marriage between his son, Don Cæsar, and the niece of the Doge Niccolò da Ponte, but on condition that the Republic gave him the title of Serenissimo and, in order not to be behind the Medici, that the young lady should be elected Daughter of the Republic with as much splendid ceremony as had been shown to Bianca Cappello. Although the negotiations had been kept very secret, Bianca had got wind of the matter through her spies, and she immediately declared herself offended and sent a letter to the Senate wherein she set forth the reasons why the Duke of Ferrara's proposal should be rejected.

'The honour of being elected a Daughter of the Republic,' said Bianca, 'is so great that it is customary to accord it only to queens or princesses whose husbands do equal kings in rank or power; wherefore it would be unseemly to bestow it upon a princess whose husband was but little better than an ordinary noble.'

She was jealous lest her own position should be prejudiced by the creation of another Daughter of the Republic. And to enforce her opposition, she pointed out to the Senate that it would be an insult to the Grand Duke, and would, moreover, confirm the suspicion that in conferring honours upon Francesco the Republic had been actuated not by real friendship, but by motives of greed or profit, especially as

Francesco was now aware of the manner in which he had been misrepresented to the King of Spain.

This letter was at first received with derision; but when the worthy senators noted the allusion to Francesco's dissatisfaction with the Republic and found that he knew of its dealings with Philip, they treated the communication seriously and decided that Florence in the hand was worth more than Ferrara still in the bush. They carried the matter off with a high hand, however, and the correspondence which ensued proved nothing except the secret disagreement between the two states. But Bianca gained her point and the projected marriage did not take place.

Another cause of strife with the Venetians occurred at this time, they having appropriated a ship belonging to Francesco's Order of San Stefano. Francesco addressed bitter reproaches to the Venetian ambassador on the conduct of his government and demanded the restoration of his vessel, and in consequence of this last quarrel the Venetians declared themselves no longer Francesco's ally and withdrew their friendship from Bianca, for ever, they said.

Simultaneously with the disturbance of outside peace, that of the Medici family itself seemed once more tottering. Although Ferdinando had withdrawn his opposition to Bianca for diplomatic reasons, and also in consideration of various services she had rendered him, his secret distrust of her had in no way diminished and he once more began to fear, not without reason, that she might be the cause of further difficulties in the family.

All these events had a very bad effect on Bianca's health. After the strain and anxieties of her secret marriage and all that preceded it, and the fatigue of the public festivities of 1579, she broke down and became subject to long and alarming fainting fits. Then the faints began to be followed by convulsions, and the doctors declared it was 'mal caduco,' or epilepsy. She grew gradually better, however, and in February 1582 thought herself cured and made a vow to

dress only in white for a year, and to wear a 'pazienza turchina' next her skin, like the nuns.

But a few months later she fell ill again, and she did herself further harm by sitting up half the night at play. Excitement in one form or another had become a necessity to her, and she had taken to the universal amusement of gambling as a means of getting through the weary hours when sleep forsook her, and her brain, even more tired than her body, saw life grey with the disappointment she would never admit even to herself in less defenceless hours, and those golden triumphs for which she had striven seemed crumbling to dust in her hand. But if in her secret soul she knew the fight she fought was harder than she had foreseen, indomitable courage still bore her up and made her show a brave front to the sharpest eyes. She would not give in either to mental weariness or physical ailments. She consulted the best physicians of the day, who advised various remedies and also sent her to the baths of Pisa, from which she certainly derived some temporary benefit. But her constitution was now completely undermined by the extravagant life she had led and by the different experiments she had tried for another purpose, and her extraordinary credulity in so trying them.

In the hope of bearing another child, and finding the regular physicians useless in helping her, Bianca consulted every quack, soothsayer, Jew hawker (for Jews were supposed to have great medical knowledge), or other impostor she could hear of. She tried every remedy they suggested, whether reasonable or not, and brought on fevers and bilious attacks by swallowing fearful concoctions brewed by her quacks and rascals, male and female. The Palace was regularly infested by this sort of person, who not only came themselves but also sent letters of advice and drugs, perhaps sometimes deeming themselves safest at a distance until they knew the effect of their medicines. Francesco forbade her to endanger her life further by trying any more of these spells and potations and dismissed the impostors peremptorily

from court; and when one day he found that a certain Jewess, whom he had specially forbidden by name to come near the place again, had, in spite of his strict orders, followed Bianca even out to Pratolino, he surprised her there and stabbed her with his own hand. After that Bianca was more careful.

Several times it was reported in Florence that the Grand Duchess's hopes of further offspring were about to be realised, and from Rome Cardinal Ferdinando immediately laid his plans for having her watched. But each time the reports proved to be without foundation, and so long as little Don Filippo, the heir apparent, lived, Ferdinando had not much to fear. But alas! his security did not last long.

With all her faults and vices, all tending only to one end, Bianca never wilfully hurt the weak and helpless, or injured those who had not injured her, and, however warped her character may have been in most respects, she gave her natural feelings full play in one direction. Throughout all events she had never neglected her maternal duties, being always a devoted mother to her own Pellegrina and faithfully fulfilling her self-imposed responsibilities towards Antonio. Now that she was mistress at the Pitti Palace and guardian of the Archduchess's orphans, she showed an affectionate carefulness over their welfare of which even the townsfolk could not complain. When the court resided at the Palazzo Vecchio Bianca advised that the children should remain at the Pitti, where they had the benefit of airier rooms and spacious gardens and were brought less into contact with the crowd of courtiers and attendants who inevitably followed the sovereigns. But their step-mother frequently paid them visits, superintending their education and their meals, joining in their games and childish interests, and taking them out driving with her in town or country.

Of these children the one who occupied most of Bianca's attention was Don Filippo, a feeble, delicate and melancholy little boy, who suffered from water on the brain and whose sweet temper and angelic nature had made him the darling

of all who knew him. This child, of such immense importance to the House of Medici and the whole state, had attached himself to his step-mother and called her 'Mamma Bianca,' for she was the only mother he had really known. Apart from all more humane considerations, she was well aware how much her own position in the family depended on her treatment of these orphans, especially of the heir, and she dealt honestly by them. But the popular tradition that compiled her history afterwards and imputed to her more crimes than she had time to commit, even laid the death of this little boy at her door.

In the middle of March 1582 Don Filippo was taken ill after eating fruit, which brought on a severe feverish attack. Francesco was at Pisa, on his way to Leghorn, but, warned of the child's illness, he returned to Florence in one day with all his suite. The utmost care and skill could do nothing to abate the fever, and the child grew rapidly worse; Bianca nursed him night and day as tenderly as though he had been her own son, but after an illness of seventeen days the little heir died on the 29th of March, aged but four years and ten months.

The grief was general throughout Tuscany, where the dead mother was held in affectionate remembrance, and all had loved this child as well for the resemblance he bore her as for his own sake. All the next day the tiny body lay in state in the great hall of the Palazzo Vecchio, dressed in red and lying upon a bed with curtains of rich brocade, his little sword by his side. In the evening he was borne to San Lorenzo, to be laid beside his mother and sisters, but, as was usual with a child of his tender years, he was given no pompous funeral; white waxen candles surrounded the coffin, and the priests and monks who chanted the office for the dead and private mourners were the only followers.

Francesco was deeply afflicted by the loss of his only son, but, following the example of Cosimo on the deaths of Giovanni and Garzia, and of King Philip when he lost his

eldest son, he would admit of no condolences or outward signs of grief. And, as had been the case with Cosimo, the people put the most sinister interpretation on Francesco's stoical reserve and self-control.

Cardinal Ferdinando, on the contrary, made no attempt to hide his sorrow, for he had loved the dead child dearly; and moreover, with the death of the heir, his distrust of Bianca and his fears for the future of the family once more revived in all their intensity.

The question of succession now became a burning and immediate one and brought the fraternal jealousy, which had been in temporary abeyance, into activity again. The most obvious course to pursue was to persuade Don Pietro de' Medici to return from Spain and marry again, but this young man, who lived in perpetual warfare with his two elder brothers, much preferred to retain his liberty. Ferdinando proposed for him the same Lavinia delle Rovere he had offered to Francesco, and to her and her brother, the Duke of Urbino, he wrote that, he himself being a priest and Francesco having no more sons, the succession rested with Pietro, whom he represented to be a sort of docile lamb, 'gentle, humane, courteous and liberal,' though the Urbino family knew well enough what kind of lamb the disastrous Don Pietro really was! However, negotiations went no further, for Pietro flatly refused to marry again, and neither the persuasions of his brothers nor the advice of King Philip had the smallest effect on him. Finding this to be the case, Ferdinando then seriously thought of laying aside his ecclesiastical dignities and taking a wife himself, to ensure the succession to the legitimate line, passing on his cardinalate to his young half-brother, Don Giovanni.

Face to face with facts, and seeing that Bianca was not likely to have any more children, it is possible that in his heart of hearts Francesco now began to regret his marriage with her; but the past could not be recalled. His trouble only deepened his melancholy and he lived almost retired at Pratolino, immersed in sad thoughts of his disappointment

and full of dull rage at the prospect of the succession passing to either of his brothers.

Francesco's despondency infected Bianca also. A cloud seemed to have come over the bright sun of her new prosperity; the heir dead and Ferdinando watchful and suspicious again (for she knew it), her position as a Medici was imperilled. Now, more than ever, would have been the right moment for Francesco to have established family peace once for all by openly acknowledging the cardinal as his heir; but this he could not bring himself to do. The grand ducal pair now intensely desired that the succession should fall to Antonio, and Ferdinando was greatly disturbed by the new prominence which was suddenly given to this boy. Although it was really impossible for Francesco to legitimise him legally, he not being the son of either of his alleged parents, negotiations were set on foot through Colonel Luigi Dovara to persuade King Philip to consent to the legitimation of Antonio and his succession also to the state of Siena. But Philip would not countenance such an outrage to the rest of the Medici family; he allowed the boy to be created Prince of Capestrano in the kingdom of Naples and an ample provision to be settled on him, but that was all he would agree to.

The Grand Duke, however, did not wait for Philip's permission, but legitimised Antonio himself by a formal act which was wholly contrary to the law for the above-mentioned reason. He presented the boy to the Council of the Two Hundred as his son, ordered that he should be addressed as Highness, and sent him out in the city riding alone in a coach with an escort of the German Guard, as though he had been really a prince. This aroused general derision amongst the people, but none ventured to speak to Francesco about the matter. Under these circumstances Antonio was looked upon as Francesco's intended successor, and the Grand Duke was even daring and foolish enough to announce the act of legitimation to Ferdinando as though it were perfectly regular and in order. All these honours

paid to a low-born bastard, and the indirect forcing of the Cardinal and Don Pietro to tolerate such a state of things, produced a condition of dangerous irritation especially prejudicial to Bianca at this juncture.

For the maintaining of the advantage she had gained and the upholding of the throne she had now made her own, this legitimation of the boy Antonio as her son by Francesco was a strange and fatal mistake for Bianca to have made. Even had he really been her child, it was a fact that had much better not have been dragged again into public notice. But the truth about his parentage being pretty generally known, his exaltation only occasioned derision and disgust amongst the people and drove the Cardinal Ferdinando at once to take measures for self-protection; for he feared, and not without good reason, that Francesco might eventually succeed in persuading King Philip to oblige him further by authoritatively appointing Antonio his successor on the throne of Tuscany.

That all this was Bianca's work her brother-in-law never doubted, and his hatred for her deepened accordingly, though his outward demeanour remained yet unchanged. In any case, her influence over her husband was such that she could have restrained him from going to such insane lengths with the boy had she so desired, and it would have been infinitely better for her if she had done so. But the judgment of even the most far-seeing and astute is liable to err at some critical moment, and it was strange that after her marriage to the Grand Duke, Bianca's hitherto infallible instinct for what was best for herself failed on more than one occasion. It was as though she had so long been strung up to the highest pitch to attain her one ambition that, having once achieved it, her tired brain faltered an instant and let her drift with the will of another, or sacrifice permanent good to momentary impulse or personal rancour.

CHAPTER XXII

DAILY LIFE

When Francesco I. de' Medici ascended the throne of Tuscany, Spain, Germany, and France were the three supreme powers in Europe. Spain ruled the destinies of Italy, and whilst carrying on the war in the Netherlands and secretly fanning the flame of civil war in France, Philip kept a heavy hand on the peninsula, where he already owned the kingdoms of Naples and Sicily, the Duchy of Milan, Sardinia, and the so-called Stati dei Presedi in the Tuscan Marshes, and the internal quarrels of the Italian princes conveniently prevented them from ever combining together to throw off the Spanish yoke. Only Elizabeth of England opposed him, and her ships roamed the Spanish Main and the West Indies, crippling Philip's power and thus favouring his enemies in the Netherlands.

Bound to one policy in his dealings with Spain and forced to be cautious with Austria, Francesco's foreign relations were even more unsatisfactory than his home affairs. Catherine de' Medici despised the junior branch of her family, as represented by Francesco, and considered herself the real heiress to Florence, as being descended from the senior branch. Although Francesco had caused public thanksgivings to be celebrated after the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew, he never favoured France or acceded to her requests for loans, and in revenge Catherine protected the Florentine exiles who had taken refuge in France after conspiring against the Grand Duke. Through his secretary of embassy in Paris, Francesco caused some of these exiles to be murdered, amongst them Troilo Orsini, who had

been Isabella's lover and who was put to death in the Queen's presence. Francesco is supposed to have merely wreaked a private vengeance in this matter, but it brought about difficulties between him and Catherine which eventually led to the breaking off of all correspondence between Tuscany and France.

The laws devised and the government as arranged by Cosimo were for those times singularly wise and practical, and had Francesco maintained the proper control, and had all the ministers and those under them been honest, Tuscany might have been reckoned a happy state. But though Francesco's government was as weak, incapable and partial in its internal affairs as in its external, in many respects he was an excellent manager, notably in finance, for even during his years of regency he had paid off many of the state debts, including those incurred by the Siennese wars. He devoted great attention to the practical study of agriculture, and the results of his studies were very useful to the country. He promoted the cultivation of mulberry-trees for the benefit of the silk trade, since then become one of the staple industries of Italy; he framed laws to prevent the exportation of vine-plants, and ordered the times of vintage so that the grapes should not be gathered before they were ripe. He also tried to grow sugar, but found the climate unfavourable and had no success. Botany and the making of gardens was another of his hobbies; indeed, he made a garden on the top of the Loggia de' Lanzi in the Piazza de' Signori, but the weight of the earth was too great for the building and had to be removed and the damaged Loggia restored.

Francesco had really intended to revive commerce and native industries, which had somewhat declined during the last years of Cosimo's reign. But, unfortunately, his private commercial enterprises were of greater importance to him than the public interests when the two clashed.

The punishment of crime was severe, even to cruelty; civil justice was rarely impartial, and it was not always

impossible to bribe the judges. The taxes and gate duties were excessive, a grievous burden on the people, but Francesco (though he had large private sources of income), always wanted money and cared little how it was obtained. He was avaricious, and though he spent immense sums on keeping up a magnificent court and on his private pleasures and luxurious villas, he never granted material support to the art corporations and city guilds as his father had done; indeed, he had inherited the artistic and scientific tastes of his House without its greater or more generous qualities. He had inherited, too, a love of sumptuous palaces, but except those works which he was obliged to complete under the terms of his father's will, the Uffizi, the 'parte postergale' of the Pitti Palace, the fine courtyard and the Boboli gardens, he built nothing of real profit to the country. The only two buildings really due to Francesco himself are the Villa of Pratolino and the Casino di San Marco in Florence, both of which were erected at the public expense but for his own private use and satisfaction.

The Casino di' San Marco (now the Florentine Assize Court) stood in the then called Via Larga, almost opposite the Piazza San Marco, and had been the scene of Lorenzo il Magnifico's wonderful garden of statuary, where all the artists of his day, amongst them the youthful Michaelangelo, came at his invitation to study the antique treasures the Prince had collected together in this garden and the house belonging to it. There is a story told of that one pupil who far outshone all other students in this early school of art; Michaelangelo, then fourteen years old, was making his first attempt with the chisel upon marble and had produced a copy of the head of an old and grinning faun, only that instead of the empty mouth of the original, the boy had introduced into his copy teeth and gums as they would naturally be seen. When he came into his garden to see the progress of the students, as was his custom, Lorenzo noted the excellence of the marble copy and commended it highly. 'Only,' said he to the lad, 'thou hast forgotten

that old people do not have all their teeth, and a faun so old as this would assuredly have lost some of his.' The boy saw the truth of his observation, and immediately the Prince had passed on he broke off a tooth from the upper jaw of his faun and also made the gum look shrunken as though it had come out root and all. And seeing the boy's prococious genius, Lorenzo took him under his special protection and gave him the education which made him the glory of Italy.

This property had been purchased by Francesco in 1567 from Messer Bernardetto de' Medici, and in 1576 he purchased another beautiful house adjoining, belonging to Archbishop Alessandro. These two were then transformed into one dwelling, according to the designs of Buontalenti, with a loggia inside the garden and the lovely little 'palazzo' at the corner of the Via degli Arazzieri, which is now called popularly the 'Casino di Bianca,' for no reason at all, however, as she never lived there. This property was subsequently settled on Antonio, and here Francesco intended he should reside when he was grown up. Here the Grand Duke pursued his studies of chemistry and other physical sciences, and, since science was then not free from superstition and mediæval belief in the supernatural, alchemy also. And although Francesco may not have done much to further the progress of science, his experiments showed him new ways for the practical application of mechanical arts, in which he was singularly clever. His skilled artificers, his furnaces, stills and machinery had originally been removed here from the Palazzo Vecchio because of the nuisance of the noise and smells, and here he delighted to work with his own hands. He was clever with china and glass, he could make false stones which would deceive even jewellers, and was a master in distilling and concocting oils and scents, medicines and poisons. Here he would often spend the whole morning, and his ministers would be forced to seek him out, to the hindrance of their business and the loss of their time, and the Grand Duke would discuss state

affairs with his eyes on his crucibles and his mind there too for the most part. Sometimes when he was not staying in the country he would even return to his laboratory after dinner, and then walk about the city till late at night, observing the moods of the populace and the condition of the city, a method of direct information he often found useful.

Although much improved and added to by Cosimo, the Pitti Palace was not at this time the splendid and imposing edifice it is now. According to Filippo Lapi's original design, it had only seven large windows on the first and second floors, four high placed smaller ones on the ground floor and three doors, of which the two side ones were subsequently converted into long windows. After the death of the Duchess Eleonora, who had purchased it from the Pitti family, Cosimo ordered Ammannati to make all needful alterations and additions fitting it for a ducal residence.

At this period, when Bianca came to the Pitti as its mistress, the grand ducal apartments were on the first floor to the front, corresponding to the seven central windows, Francesco's being on the south side, Bianca's on the north. Five of the smaller back rooms on Bianca's side were used by her as a kind of museum for all the art treasures and valuable things she had either received as gifts or had purchased for herself, and these showrooms were called the *Camerini della Granduchessa*. On the walls hung fine paintings and portraits of sovereigns, cardinals, and Italian princesses and ladies of special beauty, most of them painted by commission of Bianca herself. On tables of carved ebony or *pietre dure*, made in the grand ducal workshops, were displayed the most valuable works of art, sculpture, bronzes, corals, rare gems, everything bearing a ticket showing the subject, the name of the artist and the donor. Amongst other things was a rare goblet of mother-of-pearl, a gift from Gregory XIII.; a large mirror presented by Philip II., then a most costly gift; there was a curious

picture of the Virgin and Christ in massive gold in relief on a background of crystal, given by the Cardinal Luigi d'Este; a chiselled gold goblet by Cellini from Cardinal Ferdinando, and a hundred other rare and beautiful things. The most prominent position in this collection was occupied by the diamond necklace sent as a wedding gift by the Venetian Senate and the casket containing the diploma declaring her a daughter of the Republic of Venice, which Bianca had begged the Grand Duke to allow her to keep in her own possession as the most valuable of all her jewels.

Bianca had her own portrait frequently painted, too, and by the best masters, for her extraordinary beauty and exquisite colouring was every where as well known as she was herself, and these counterfeit presentments were sent to important personages as marks of respect or affection. The larger pictures, wherein she was shown at full-length, were executed by Francesco's orders for the various ducal palaces or villas; what became of these is a mystery, for they disappeared after her death and were probably destroyed when the new Grand Duke removed all traces of this fatal beauty from the city and the palaces of the House of Medici. Alessandro Allori, usually known as Bronzino, painted her no less than seventeen times, and the portraits that have survived are mostly by him; Pulzone, Jacopo da Bassano, Michele Ghirlandajo, Bartolommeo Argentieri of Rome, and many others, are known to have executed portraits of her, and there were also busts by various sculptors. Bianca aimed at ranking as a patroness of art; she never refused assistance to artists and persuaded Francesco to help them in need, and when age, infirmity or misfortune overtook them she succoured them again and again, as in the case of the aged Gian da Bologna. In truth, however reprehensible may have been the manner in which she obtained admittance into the Medici family, it cannot be denied that she brought with her to the throne a proper consciousness of the splendour and behaviour and

open-handedness of a real princess; she was more truly Medici, indeed, than some of those born to the name, and those writers who accuse her of parsimony and unwillingness to give help, with no thought but of accumulating wealth for Pellegrina and Antonio, do her a great injustice.

Bianca had, in truth, adopted the magnificent ideas of the Medici with regard to her expenses. Mistress of a considerable fortune which was entirely at her own disposal, she further received from Francesco a large monthly allowance of five hundred gold ducats, and also the interest on certain sums which, following his example and that of his mother, the Duchess Eleonora, she had placed in the hands of trusted bankers for purposes of trade or usury; so she was well able to provide for herself in a manner fitting her condition and also for those dependent on her.

She was never mean to any who served her well or obtained her favour. She loved money as much as did Francesco, but in her case it was not from motives of avarice, for she spent freely both on herself and others, though her gifts were not always bestowed on the most worthy. Notwithstanding all these sources of income, she sometimes had to ask Francesco for advances and, unlike his treatment of poor Giovanna, he never refused her, letting her off with a friendly admonition to be careful, even when he knew that she had passed half the night at the gambling-table, to the detriment both of her health and her purse.

Bianca spent large sums, too, on keeping secret agents in Venice, Rome and the other Italian courts in order that she might be informed of the smallest events, private or public, likely to be useful to her; gentlemen, prelates and friars were amongst these well-paid spies of hers, who provided another reason for the general execration of her. But, living as she did, with every man's hand against her, it behoved her not to be ignorant of anything that might give her the least advantage over her enemies. And in such times of insecure thrones and frequent changes of government these plagues of society were necessary, especially for rulers

who, like the later Medici, had to be on their guard not only against outside foes, but also against their former fellow-citizens and present subjects. For sheer self-preservation they were often driven to lend an ear to these contemptible creatures, who obtained entrance into houses under the mask of friendship only to betray those whose hospitality they accepted, for they might be the only means of learning information which meant life or death to their employer.

The new Grand Duchess surrounded herself as far as she could exclusively with persons whom she could trust, though she was not always more successful in this than was Francesco. Only faithful and tried servants had accompanied her from her private house to the Pitti; Piero Elmi was made a special attendant on the Grand Duke's children, and after Bianca's death he entered the service of Don Antonio as majordomo, for he had attached himself to the boy, in whom he might almost be said to have a proprietary interest! Gismondo and one Piero Bambini, a steward, also moved with their mistress; the servants at the Palace were all retained in their places, with the exception of the Germans who had come with Giovanna and who departed again after her death.

When she lived in the Via Maggio or the Rucellai Gardens Bianca's principal guests and associates had been gentlemen of Francesco's court, each and all of whom considered that her promotion had been largely due to their friendship and influence, and thought themselves entitled, therefore, to treat her with the same familiarity as before. But they forgot the altered circumstances, the higher rank, and did not realise that they had been merely used as tools. In spite of their position, therefore, they had to be shown their places, and Bianca proceeded to do it; and probably this fact had as much to do with the fall from favour of Pandolfo de' Bardi and Mario Sforza as had the machinations of Vettore Cappello.

To her favourites amongst her women attendants Bianca was very generous, giving them dowries when they married

and frequently granting them large allowances afterwards. One of the principal of these favourites was a beautiful and clever girl named Laura, the daughter of a high ecclesiastic of Bologna and born when he was a very young man. Her father, who adored her, had placed her in the care of his sister, a nun, in one of the principal educational convents in Bologna, where she became singularly accomplished. She had great musical talents, could play on various instruments, including the seven-stringed lyre, and was also reputed one of the finest singers of her time in Italy. Her father had obtained for her the patronage of the Cardinal Ferdinando, who recommended her as governess to his young nieces in Florence, where she soon became the delight of the whole court. And when the Grand Duke grew more and more morose and difficult to deal with, Laura would play and sing and exhibit her great dexterity in games and sleight of hand for the amusement of both the family at the Pitti and of exalted strangers whom they were obliged to entertain, so that Bianca soon became attached to the young girl and found her an indispensable member of the household.

There were dwarfs, too, as was then the fashion at courts, privileged little people who acted as court fools with the usual licence. One pretty graceful female dwarf who could dance and sing had been sent to Bianca by the Queen of Poland, and a little fellow named Morgante, a clever jester, had been with her some time and used to accompany the grand ducal party on hunting and pleasure expeditions, even before Bianca's second marriage.

In matter of charity, too, the new Grand Duchess strove to take her proper place. She used to stand godmother to the children of courtiers, or of poor families who had been recommended to her favour, and always proved herself a veritable fairy godmother on such occasions. If the child were of noble parentage she would present a silver cup or bowl, a string of pearls, or a gold necklace, and there was always a piece of money tucked away in the child's clothes for the nurse. City babies, too, came in for proofs of her

generosity, and thus she made a bid for popularity. To convents and monasteries Bianca contributed largely; Gregory XIII. had granted her the same privileges of entrance as the Archduchess Giovanna had possessed, and she and Pellegrina and their ladies would often visit the nuns, sharing in their devotions and helping with the needlework the pious women did for sale. At the Dominican convent of San Vincenzo at Prato lived the noble Florentine, Caterina de' Ricci, an ardent disciple of the martyr friar Savonarola and herself respected as a saint, and to her Bianca paid many visits, asking her prayers and intercessions that she might obtain that son who was to be her safeguard for the future. Caterina had been the friend of the Grand Duchess Giovanna, who had come to her with the same object as did now her successor. The holy woman received them both and listened to each; but she was not deceived for all that she lived retired from the world, and in the messages to the Grand Duchesses, as in turn they lay at the point of death, she sent her love to Giovanna, to Bianca her prayers for her soul's peace.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE END OF ORSINI

Bianca had soon become aware of Ferdinando's renewed, though covert, suspicions, but as a past-mistress in the art of dissembling she let no word or sign betray that she had noted it; rather did she increase the friendliness of her attitude towards him and seize every opportunity of making herself useful both to him personally and to the family in general. Thus she warded off another rupture, and it so happened that just at the time of Ferdinando's most acute irritation over Francesco's legitimation of young Antonio, in defiance of the advice and representations of all his statesmen and ministers, Bianca was able to render a signal service to the Medici family which did much towards improving the political situation generally.

The match between the Prince of Mantua and the Princess of Parma had been broken off, and the Gonzaga had reverted to their first idea of a marriage with Eleonora de' Medici, which was, indeed, considering the political condition of Italy at that moment, the best they could make. Francesco also was desirous of bringing it about, for if the Duke of Mantua needed the friendship of the wealthy and powerful Medici, Francesco was pleased to form an alliance by marriage with a House high in the favour of Austria. There were, however, great difficulties in the way of a satisfactory arrangement, for each side demanded concessions which the other refused, and the negotiations seemed on the point of falling through again when Bianca stepped into the breach and by her ready tact and resource saved the situation.

Photo Brogi

ELEONORA DE' MEDICI, DAUGHTER OF FRANCESCO I

From a portrait by Scipione Pulzone

Questions of great import to the family had to be discussed, however, and it became absolutely necessary for Ferdinando to return to Florence to take part in the family council, which he did with great reluctance and only at the urgent and repeated requests of his brother and sister-in-law. For in addition to this Gonzaga marriage, which was to close the feud with the Dukes of Mantua, another equally important was also looming on the horizon, that of Donna Virginia de' Medici, the daughter of Cosimo by Cammilla Martelli, and Don Cesare d'Este, which would similarly bring into the family circle the hitherto hostile Duke of Ferrara.

In the interests of his House, therefore, ever his first consideration, Ferdinando found himself obliged to travel to Florence and dissemble his feelings with dignified patience. Not being a man to do a thing by halves, he affected perfect confidence and friendship with the Grand Duchess, who, for once making common cause with him, played into his hands and received his attentions at their face value. In order further to show a conciliatory spirit and please his brother during this visit to Florence, the Cardinal bestowed his villa and estate of Ambrogiana upon Don Antonio as a gift, to the genuine surprise and pleasure of both the boy's adopted parents. Delighted at this pleasant state of affairs, Francesco left the settlement of the difficulties principally in Bianca's hands; and she, anxious to strengthen her position and prove her powers of diplomacy to Ferdinando, exerted them to such good effect that not only did she smooth away all friction in the Gonzaga negotiations, but also successfully prepared the way for the marriage of Donna Virginia. That, however, was not to take place for some time yet.

This was the first wedding in the younger generation of the Medici, and Francesco wished his eldest daughter's nuptials to be celebrated by festivities as splendid as any that had ever been witnessed in the city, both in honour of the bride and also for the purpose of making an impression

upon his late enemy and new son-in-law. But the Duke of Mantua insisted, and was not to be denied, that his heir's wedding should take place in his own capital. When, however, Don Vincenzo came to Florence to see his bride, Francesco overwhelmed his new ally with courtesies; he went to meet him at Pratolino, and exhibited the glories of his favourite retreat before bringing the guest in triumph into Florence. The Prince was a stout and colourless youth with the manners of a German (so the Duke of Urbino's agent described him); but he made up for his own lack of tone by the gorgeousness of his escort, which consisted of forty gentlemen attired alike in crimson satin trimmed with gold and wearing heavily plumed hats, costumes which struck even the gay Florentines as being more suitable for carnival than for ordinary wear. Notwithstanding his appearance, however, Don Vincenzo was a dissolute and quarrelsome youth, and only two years before had, during a chance dispute on a dark night, killed his tutor, the young Scotsman known as the Admirable Crichton. It was hoped that marriage would sober and reform him. Pope Gregory XIII. (who had obtained assistance from the Grand Duke against the bandits who infested the papal states and even Rome itself, and whom Gregory's own forces were not strong enough to put down), sent the bride the Golden Rose, which was presented to her after mass in the cathedral, and for a week the usual games and entertainments were held in honour of the wedding. One strange amusement seen in Florence on festival occasions was a buffalo race, and on this occasion there was held a great race of eight buffaloes, very splendidly decked; the animals ran from the Ponte a Rubaconte to the Piazza Santa Croce, urged on by servants in the liveries of their owners and playing musical instruments, including bagpipes and flutes. And on this day the buffalo belonging to the Grand Duke was declared the winner!

Cardinal Ferdinando attended the wedding of his niece and, much against his will, escorted her to her new home in

Mantua. He had, indeed, meant to return immediately to Rome, but forebore further to irritate Francesco by a refusal. Thus the marriage was a double triumph for Bianca, inasmuch as she had served the Medici and won over the Gonzaga family, who had been so specially insulting to her on the occasion of her own marriage with the Grand Duke of Tuscany.

The only thing now lacking to complete the family satisfaction was the return of Don Pietro from Spain and his promise to take a second wife as soon as a suitable lady could be persuaded to risk her future with such a husband. King Philip's advice prevailed where his brother's desires had failed and Pietro promised to obey, but demanded a delay of four years, which the Grand Duke granted. Bianca was well pleased at this, as she considered the marriage of Pietro and the introduction of a new and high-born sister-in-law into the family would by no means improve her own position; but Ferdinando regarded the postponement with deep annoyance and distrust, considering that the situation admitted of no delay in providing the state with a legitimate heir.

Pietro so far followed his brothers' wishes, however, that he returned to Florence from Spain in July of this year, but unfortunately his return was the cause of a fresh family rupture. In his train he had brought back with him to Florence the soldier, Colonel Luigi Dovara, who had been sent to Spain with him on the Portuguese business that he might assist the young man with his advice and experience, and who had boasted that to his influence had been mainly due the honourable position accorded the Prince at the Spanish court. Dovara soon began to cultivate a great friendship with Abbioso and Serguidi, and through them was presently admitted into the confidence of both Francesco and Bianca. These two worthies had always viewed with displeasure the reconciliation between the brothers, and Abbioso in particular hated Ferdinando because he had prevented him being elected suffragan bishop of the diocese

of Pistoja. So long as the Cardinal made common cause with Bianca they had not dared to show their hands, but immediately that they observed the unmistakable signs of his renewed coldness towards her they cautiously began to act. Now, by covertly insinuating that he sought his own personal advantage and not the general good, and was, therefore, not to be trusted in any affairs of state, they succeeded in throwing the ever-suspicious Francesco into a fresh access of irritation against his brother. Ferdinando had already had too much experience of Dovara's treachery to approve of Francesco's newest favourite, for even whilst in Spain the man had tried to make mischief. And he presently found to what extent the trio, Dovara, Serguidi and Abbioso, had succeeded in freshly poisoning his brother's mind against him, for when next the Cardinal came to Florence he was again excluded from all affairs of state and business and treated by the Grand Duke with a coldness which could not be misunderstood.

To further complicate matters, Don Pietro had brought with him from Spain yet another companion, a beautiful Spaniard named Donna Maria Hurtado, with whom he was violently in love and whom he wished to present at court and overwhelm with attentions and honours. As she was by birth a gentlewoman, and for the sake of keeping the peace with Pietro, she was received privately by the Grand Duke and Duchess at Pratolino, but they refused to receive her officially at the Pitti. Pietro's rage was great, as he naturally considered his sister-in-law the last person to be squeamish in the matter of morals. Like Sforza and the others, however, he forgot that Bianca Bonaventuri and Bianca, Grand Duchess of Tuscany, were two very different persons. Moreover, he was again over head and ears in debt, and declared that he would not even contemplate taking a wife he did not want until his debts were paid for him and an additional income assured him, to be entirely at his own disposal. Francesco, who only four years before had extricated him from his difficulties by making over to him

for life a certain portion of his own patrimony, was not inclined to assist the spendthrift further (though eventually something had to be done), and Pietro therefore threw himself wholly on the side of his other brother, whom he hoped would be more complaisant.

All things combined to upset anew the recently established family peace. Francesco, ever fearful, listened to the calumnies against his brother whispered in his ears by his false ministers and felt himself threatened on his throne. Bianca, more wary, made all ostensible excuses for Ferdinando, declaring the accusations exaggerated and not proven, for she did not wish to be ranked as an enemy of either brother-in-law.

The deterioration of Francesco's character, the incessant family quarrels, her own inability to dominate the Florentines, and, above all, her childlessness, were unforeseen circumstances which produced indescribable complications in Bianca's well-laid plans. With the return of the turbulent Pietro her position seemed suddenly to have grown more difficult than ever. Like the ebb and flow of the tide, peace and war alternated in the bosom of the Medici family, and though her triumphs in mediation and statecraft were many and brilliant, she seemed as impotent as Canute to check the waves of hostility that threatened to engulf her in the end. Her intentions were honest; she wanted peace and prosperity, and she desperately wanted the goodwill of Ferdinando, that strong man in whose hands would lie her own fate should Francesco die before her. But she knew too well that the Cardinal's cordiality towards her was solely for the sake of family welfare, the only interest they two had in common, and that his outward show of courtesy was paid to the crown she wore, while beneath it the implacable judge looked upon her as an intruder and a disgrace. Had the brothers remained on friendly terms the situation would have been easier to manage; but as it was, although she recognised the Cardinal's claims and respected his unwavering attitude, she must play fair, for her safety's sake

if for no higher reason. There was no option now for her; through thick and thin she must side with Francesco. And if some of the shining glory she had hankered after turned to dust and ashes at her touch, if the reality were less than had been the dream, if the husband were not all the lover had promised, the secret must be buried in her own heart and her wits must strive to hide the fact from public knowledge, and her strength must supplement Francesco's weakness.

Francesco de' Medici was certainly weak, but far from stupid, inasmuch as he was well aware of his own weakness. For this reason he was furiously jealous of his authority, refusing to yield even to the Papal Nuncio or the Inquisitors of the Holy Office (whose sway he would not admit in his dominions), in matters where he thought his right was being infringed. Even Bianca had to proceed with the utmost caution, and had she tried to take part openly in the government it would have been fatal to her influence, for open interference was what Francesco would brook from none. But she knew her prince too well, and she knew how a woman can rule wherever she will. In the privacy of domestic life Francesco discussed everything with her, even his relations with other Powers, and as she had ample and private information from other sources she was kept well informed on all points. The keen intelligence that had served so well for her own ends was now employed to weigh and judge in matters of graver import, and where the welfare of the state and the maintaining of the power in her husband's hands were concerned, her grasp of a situation was both clear and just. His wife and his ministers had learnt how to manage this magnificent Medici, and he did not perceive how he was dominated by their influence. When he sat in council they would throw out respectful hints and suggestions as to the best way to act (always in conformity with their own prearranged plans), and would then dismiss their own ideas as insufficient, and Francesco, not lacking in statecraft or the sense to seize a good idea, would presently bring up the plan again as his

own proposal. Thus dignity was saved and the end achieved.

If the ruling family was divided against itself, however, the state was at peace. Only the quarrel with Venice now disturbed the general harmony between Tuscany and the other states, and this quarrel, which concerned many questions both on land and sea, Francesco determined to settle as soon as possible.

During these times of peace Francesco had exercised his talent for finances, to the benefit of his treasury but to the great discontent of the people. By means of increased taxation he had amassed a large amount of money, some thirty thousand scudi a year. But the cost of his extensive building undertakings and the splendid entertainments and court ceremonials had considerably diminished this sum, and, the Grand Duke's avarice being reawakened, he began now to exercise strict economy. As his family grew smaller he made it the excuse for reducing the number of his courtiers and household; he introduced vigorous domestic reforms, and not only dismissed numerous officials, pages, guards and grooms, but also disposed of many of his fine thoroughbred horses. Finding that more was spent on his household expenses than, in his present mood, he considered necessary, he limited the controllers rigidly and cut down their resources, even punishing some for extravagance that he had hitherto never remarked. He did not want to spend more than three thousand ducats a month on his family expenses, including the Grand Duchess, the princes Don Antonio and Don Giovanni, the young princesses, and Don Virginio Orsini, son of the ill-fated Isabella, whom he had taken into his own house after the mother's death. Only the cost of entertaining strangers was admitted to be an extra item and was paid for out of state funds.

The gate dues, which also went to swell the ducal coffers, were now more rigidly exacted than ever, and woe to whomever should be found trying to evade them. The coachman of Count Ulisse Bentivoglio, Bianca's son-in-law, once

attempted to smuggle something into the city and was detected in the act; it came to the Grand Duke's ears and he ordered that, as the Count was responsible for his servant's deeds, his coach and horses should be sold to pay the fine. Francesco was trying to get something back of all that he had spent out of his own purse on Pellegrina's wedding, when even money was as naught compared with his love for Pellegrina's mother. The courtiers who absented themselves from the palace without leave during the residence of the sovereigns were deprived of their salaries. Rigid economy, in truth! Francesco declared that he was forced to make up for the extravagance of others, meaning his brothers and his brother-in-law, Paolo Giordano Orsini, and perhaps intending a hint even for Bianca herself.

It was this year that Paolo Giordano Orsini came prominently on the scene again, and for the last time. Early in April died Gregory XIII., and the choice of the conclave fell on Cardinal Montalto, who assumed the triple crown as Sixtus V., and this election led to the sequel of one of those domestic tragedies of the Medici which had been enacted nine years earlier.

Isabella, Duchess of Bracciano, had been foully murdered by her husband on a charge of unfaithfulness, yet all her three brothers remained on friendly terms with the murderer. Even if this had not suited their own ends there would have been nothing remarkable in it, for the murder of a wife, sister, or daughter *per causa d'onore* was accounted not only excusable, but even an act of righteousness, as upholding family honour. And the moral character of the male relative who carried out the sentence was quite immaterial.

But a noble care for the stainlessness of his name was not Paolo Giordano's sole motive for strangling his wife. He himself had engaged in countless vices and amours, and one of these adventures concerned a lady who made him feel the existence of Isabella to be a nuisance.

Cardinal Montalto had a nephew, Felice or Francesco

Peretti, who was married to a girl of extraordinary attractiveness and beauty, by name Vittoria Accoramboni. Her father was an impoverished noble, her mother an ambitious and scheming woman who had married her to young Peretti as being the best available match, and she had six brothers who all managed to profit in one way or another by their sister's marriage with the nephew of an influential ecclesiastic. But the lovely Vittoria was both frail and extravagant, and very soon there was debt and discord in the young household. Then one of the brothers, an utter rascal named Marcello, who was in the service of the Duke of Bracciano, devised the brilliant plan of introducing his sister to his master, with a view to the repairing of both her fortune and his own. Vittoria played only too well into Marcello's hands, and speedily awakened such a passion in the great Duke of Bracciano (great in more than one sense of the word, for he was a big, stout, unwieldy man), that he was ready to do anything to obtain her. But the Accoramboni were playing for high stakes; Paolo Giordano must pay full price for what he wanted. For some four years after Isabella's death his passion was alternately stimulated and repressed, until Marcello was satisfied that he was ready to make Vittoria his Duchess and to consent to the murder of Peretti, which must of necessity precede his marriage with Peretti's wife. Then only did Vittoria receive him, and plans to enable him to marry her were immediately put under discussion. How great the Accoramboni considered the prize to be may be gathered not only from the danger they were prepared to run in obtaining it, but also from the lady being willing to receive a lover who was both repulsively stout and afflicted with unhealable sores. But these defects were trifles compared with his wealth and position.

One evening in April Peretti, who, in spite of everything, loved his wife and had no suspicions of her kindred, was lured from his house by a false message from Marcello and murdered. The relations between the families were so well known that suspicion fell immediately on the Duke and the

Accoramboni, and the latter fled for safety to a country house belonging to Orsini, where they were protected by the *bravi* and fugitive criminals whom he, like most other nobles, maintained as members of his household for his own security or the wreaking of private vengeance. And here Vittoria and the Duke were secretly married, for the brother and sister judged it wise to lose no time in taking him at his word and securing him. Such a scandal arose, however, on the thing becoming known, that Gregory XIII., urged by both the Orsini and Medici families, annulled the marriage; Paolo Giordano pretended to obey and renounced his bride, and Vittoria was imprisoned in the castle of Sant' Angelo and tried for complicity in Peretti's murder, but eventually released and banished from Rome.

What excited the greatest surprise, however, was the behaviour of the victim's uncle, the Cardinal Montalto. He had been devoted to his nephew, but he it was who begged that all inquiry and pursuit of the murderers should be stopped, and who generally exhibited such Christian charity and forbearance that while some called him a saint, others more shrewdly termed him a consummate hypocrite with ulterior motives for his saintliness. This mild behaviour, nevertheless, contributed largely towards procuring his election as pope, and then his supporters had another surprise.

Two years before this Orsini had defied the Pope by marrying Vittoria again, this time in church; again Gregory had declared the ceremony null and void, and again the Duke had pretended obedience, only to marry her for the third time publicly in Rome directly Gregory was dead, and by chance only a few hours before Cardinal Montalto was elected as his successor. Now came the surprise. The mild and forgiving Cardinal immediately became a stern and unbending pontiff, and Orsini was peremptorily bidden to get rid of his *bravi* and outlaws, and cautioned in plain terms strictly to obey the papal commands if he would not incur vengeance of the bitterest description. The great Duke thereupon judged it wiser to quit Rome.

The exact cause of Paolo Giordano's death is uncertain, but six months later it occurred at Salò on the Lake of Garda, where he and Vittoria were living in princely exile. He may have succumbed to the dreadful disease from which he had long suffered, but there was more than a hint of poison in the affair. The Orsini had no love for the head of their clan; Francesco de' Medici was tired of a brother-in-law whose senseless extravagance exceeded even his great wealth, and he had charge of young Virginio who was heir to Paolo Giordano's title and estates. Sixtus V. had Cardinal Montalto's private grievance to revenge, and, moreover, he was minded to sweep his states clean of the bandits and hired murderers who rendered all lives unsafe. So he desired a closer friendship with Francesco, and begged his assistance in finally exterminating these pests and establishing order. Thus they played into each other's hands.

The Duke of Bracciano left a will providing his widow with houses and money and all things needful for her state and dignity. But her husband's family had deeply resented his marriage with her, and took the law into their own hands. Six weeks after the Duke's death armed men invaded the house one night, shot Vittoria's young brother Flaminio as he sat singing in the hall (Marcello managed to escape), and then made their way to the Duchess's room, where she was undressing for the night, and drove their daggers deep into her breast.

Thus died Paolo Giordano Orsini and his second wife, ten times more guilty in love-affairs than had been the first Duchess of Bracciano, and with blood-guiltiness on her hands as well, and her marriage had been of her own free will and for greed alone. Perhaps Isabella was herein to some extent avenged, for if she had sinned it was only against her husband who had a hundred times more heavily sinned against her, and who with his own hands had taken her life as forfeit.

CHAPTER XXIV

POOR CAMMILLA

HAVING satisfactorily arranged one marriage in the Medici family, Bianca now turned her attention to smoothing out the serious difficulties which stood in the way of the other match already proposed.

When the general reconciliation amongst the princes took place, as has been related, the Cardinal d'Este, backed up by Ferdinando, with whom he was now on friendly terms, had on behalf of Don Cesare d'Este proposed for the hand of Donna Virginia de' Medici, the daughter of Cosimo and Cammilla Martelli; they hoped thus to put an end once and for all to the old strife between the houses, now long estranged but in former times allies. Donna Virginia, however, had been promised by Francesco in marriage to a friend of his own, Francesco Sforza, and though his subsequently unsatisfactory behaviour had made the Grand Duke unwilling to give him his sister as wife, the engagement had not been formally cancelled.

After his betrothal Sforza had conceived hopes of having a cardinal's hat bestowed upon him, and had postponed his marriage again and again in the expectation of attaining to the higher and more profitable position. As his expectations in the ecclesiastical direction did not seem likely to be fulfilled after all, he now began to press for the carrying out of his long-deferred matrimonial plans and claimed his affianced bride, for whom her brother had meanwhile formed other and more advantageous views. A formal promise of marriage being binding, however, and the bridegroom refusing to renounce his rights, another way out of

the dilemma had to be found, and it was Bianca who found it by bringing once more upon the scene a figure who had long since vanished from the public eye. The betrothal of Virginia to Sforza had been arranged by Francesco before his half-sister was of an age to object, but now, being come to years of discretion, she and her mother, Cammilla Martelli, were made to protest formally against an engagement entered into by the Grand Duke without their consent. At the same time the Duke of Ferrara, who greatly desired the alliance of his son with the House of Medici, journeyed to Rome to confer with the two Cardinals, and the Pope was easily persuaded to bestow the red hat on the tiresome Sforza and thus remove all his pretensions to the hand of Donna Virginia.

The Medici-Este wedding had been postponed, however, for various political and domestic reasons until February 1586, when the bride was some seventeen years old. Although it was in every way a good thing for him and his schemes, the Grand Duke showed his unquenchable hatred of his unhappy stepmother by extraordinary meanness in the matter of the dowry. Virginia herself only possessed forty thousand scudi inherited from her father, and the dowry being fixed at an hundred thousand, the remainder had to be provided by her brothers; whereupon Francesco made use of poor Cammilla's affection for her only child to force her to renounce the income settled on her by Cosimo, to repay him, as he said, for the sum he had contributed to Virginia's dowry. There was but little left for Francesco to do in order to lower himself yet deeper in the estimation of the Florentines, but this mean robbery of his father's widow aroused loud and universal disgust even amongst the members of his own family.

True to his practice, however, Francesco spared no expense in outward show at this wedding, with the object of making an impression on his quondam rival, the Duke of Ferrara.

The principal item in these particular festivities was the

performance of a musical comedy called 'L'Amico Fido,' the work of Giovanni de' Bardi, in which there were five changes of scene, showing alternately earth and heaven, with much wonderful mechanism contrived by the indispensable and ingenious Buontalenti. But this performance was preceded by a strange little comedy unseen of the general public, and serving to show into what a condition of distrust and suspicion of all around him the Grand Duke had now fallen. The nun of Prato, Caterina de' Ricci, had had some sort of a vision apparently and had written to Francesco warning him to take special care, as the great hall where the play was to take place was in imminent danger of falling into ruins. So, not trusting any one, Francesco himself made a thorough investigation of all the premises and apartments beneath the great hall of the Uffizi, throwing open not only the doors of the private rooms of the magistrates and other officers who dwelt on the lower floors, but even examining cupboards and chests to make sure that no explosives or other dangerous things were concealed there. When he had satisfied himself that all was safe he had the doors all locked and sentries placed before each, and only then was the performance allowed to commence. The hall had been lavishly decorated and repainted months beforehand in preparation for this event; the company was gorgeously dressed and bejewelled, there were countless lights blazing down upon the splendid costumes of the men, the scarlet robes of the cardinals, and beautiful women in their festal attire, and altogether it was another typical example of the wonderful entertainments which only the Medici could devise and carry out.

But in all this splendid company the observed of all observers, the one in whom the greatest interest centred was the mother of the bride, the still lovely Cammilla Martelli, who, after twelve years of strict imprisonment in her convent, had come forth into the world again for the first time to witness the marriage of her only child. It was with the utmost difficulty that the vindictive Francesco

had been induced to give permission for this reappearance, and it had required all the persuasion of both Bianca and Ferdinando to obtain it, they asserting that it would be in the highest degree unseemly and unjust if she were absent on such an occasion.

When, immediately after Cosimo's death, Cammilla had been hurried into the convent which was meant to be her lifelong prison, she had gone unresistingly, for she had had no thought but that it was only a temporary measure, and her own family had urged compliance as the best way of overcoming the new Grand Duke's resentment against her. But the change was a sad one for the lively young woman, accustomed to her full liberty and the indulgence of a doting and elderly husband. Francesco could not deprive her of the money which his father had settled on her, but he did compel her to give up the jewels she possessed, declaring that they had only been given her for her use during Cosimo's lifetime and not as her actual property; and in the hope of softening her stepson's heart towards her she yielded. Other gifts, clothes and furniture, she was allowed to keep, at least as much as she could use in the convent; but many valuables, as well as estates difficult to manage without personal supervision and considerable expense, she was also forced to resign to Francesco. He did, however, make her occasional advances out of these funds, for Cammilla had learnt from Cosimo how to spend regally, and even in her convent she was frequently in debt or had anticipated her income.

Although the restricted life she now led and the rules of the convent of Santa Monaca precluded any kind of state, and the apartments at her disposal were few, Cammilla had eight or nine persons with her, companions and servants, who naturally lived at her expense. In addition to these she supported several poor girls, orphans being educated at the convent, dowering them when they came to be married; she also contributed to the support of her parents, and gave large sums to the nuns. If the oil or wine or corn ran

short in times of scarcity, the convent stores were replenished at Cammilla's expense; and thus, with the rent of her apartments, the clothing and food for so many dependent on her, it is not surprising if her yearly income of four thousand eight hundred scudi sometimes failed to suffice.

Much money went, too, in the exquisite embroideries on linen, cloth or silk for which the nuns of Florence were famous. Cammilla herself was an adept in this art of the needle, and under her direction the most beautiful and costly work was done, bed covers, pillows, garments, church vestments and decorations, principally for the Grand Duchess Bianca, who had shown the captive constant and unvarying kindness in spite of Francesco's harshness. The trousseau for the pretty daughter whose daily life she might not share was made in the convent under the mother's own supervision (and with what tears and hopes and longings for her child and for her own freedom must those bridal garments have been sewn!), as well as that for Francesco's daughter Maria, afterwards Queen of France, and for both these young girls Cosimo's widow bore the chief expense.

Far from diminishing, however, Francesco's vindictiveness against his stepmother only increased as time went on, and he began to suspect her of all sorts of plots and plans. The easy discipline of both convents and monasteries permitted her plenty of freedom in the matter of visitors, and in any case her position as widow of the Grand Duke Cosimo rendered the nuns indulgent towards such a distinguished and liberal guest. Cammilla was convinced that some day or other she would return to the world and liberty, and still young as she was, and 'beautiful as the sun' (as one admiring ecclesiastic described her), she naturally looked forward to marrying again. Her rank permitted her to receive visitors of high degree; not only ladies, but also prelates, monks, officers and even youths of noble families frequented the reception-room set apart for Cammilla. And whilst they told tales and gossip (not always

suitable to the conventual surroundings!), and ate the cakes and sweets and preserves which, as was the fashion of the times, the hostess and her ladies had prepared with their own hands for their guests, or to send as gifts to friends and relatives, doubtless not a few of these gentlemen would only too gladly have espoused this woman whom all admired and pitied. She had ever been a creature of pleasure, never one to care much for intellectual pursuits or console herself with philosophical reflections, and she was sick to death of her life within four walls and of the veiled and cloistered heads who were her daily and inevitable companions. Perchance some one amongst her male visitors had made the outside world seem more desirable than ever; but however that may have been, poor Cammilla's plaints grew more insistent, more frequent her cry for release.

And each day the Grand Duke grew more obdurate. He had heard something, vague reports that had displeased him, or else it was only that his now rapidly deteriorating character and painful suspiciousness singled out his stepmother as a scapegoat for all the rest of those he hated. She appealed to Ferdinando, who had always been kind to her, even from the first days of her marriage to Cosimo, and who had vigorously disapproved of Francesco's treatment of her. Through Ferdinando she had, during the first years of her captivity, obtained permission to receive freely all the personages mentioned in the long list of names she regularly forwarded to him in Rome; but now these lists were severely censored when they were returned to Florence, and all persons suspected of being Cammilla's special friends were forbidden access to her. She must have no chance of forming amorous intrigues which might lead to a second marriage. The abbess of the convent was ordered to keep strict watch and ward over her inmate, and even Francesco Sforza, during the time that he was betrothed to Donna Virginia, was not allowed to visit his future mother-in-law.

And so there awoke in poor tormented Cammilla's soul a bitter hatred of Francesco which clouded her intelligence, never too keen, plunged her into a state of dark melancholy, and eventually reduced her to a mental condition from which she never wholly recovered. Even before her daughter's marriage she had become subject to violent attacks of hysterics and convulsions, which threw her into such high fevers that sometimes her life was despaired of. Her physicians declared that she must be set at liberty if she was to be saved, and joined their prayers to hers to persuade the Grand Duke to allow this still young and beautiful woman to leave her prison and marry again—a natural course to which there was absolutely no obstacle except the cruelty of the man who had her in his power. And the only result of these supplications was that her confinement was made even closer, and none save her nearest relatives now allowed to see her.

But even this obstinacy, which amounted to an obsession on Francesco's part, had to yield to the representations of Bianca, Ferdinando and the bridegroom that the presence of the bride's mother at the wedding was absolutely necessary, if only to prevent the people from crying public shame upon their ruler. Three days before the ceremony Bianca herself, accompanied by Pellegrina Bentivoglio, drove to the convent of Santa Monaca and fetched Cammilla away to the Pitti Palace, that she might be there in time to receive Don Cesare and participate in all the festivities. And all that Bianca could do was done to give this poor lady at least one happy week, if that indeed was to be all the liberty accorded her.

Perhaps Francesco had had good reason, from his own point of view, for keeping Cammilla in seclusion, for her reappearance in their midst aroused in the Florentines such admiration and pity for her, such memories of Duke Cosimo, that their disgust with Francesco and indignation at his treatment of his father's widow and his behaviour generally, was suddenly increased a hundredfold. Also his

latest meanness in compelling her to give up her own fortune, already slender for her requirements, to increase her daughter's dowry and save Francesco's own pocket—whence by all just rights the money should have come—was discussed in no measured terms.

If Francesco was cruel, however, Cammilla's other stepsons did all they could to show her affection and respect. To the rage of the Grand Duke, not only did Ferdinando, who, of course, had to come to Florence for his sister's wedding, and Don Pietro devote themselves to her both in public and private and pay her every possible attention, but the principal Florentines showed openly by the honours they paid her how greatly they venerated the memory of the Grand Duke Cosimo, and implied scorn of his successor.

The rest of Cammilla's story may be briefly told. Immediately the wedding festivities were ended and the bridal couple had departed on the way to Ferrara, she was ordered back into her convent. Vain were the hopes she had cherished, vain the requests and supplications in her favour of the whole family; Francesco was inexorable. Back she had to go, to a life a thousand times more unbearable now than before, because all hope of eventual liberty had vanished, and the brief glimpse she had had of life outside made Santa Monaca seem utterly intolerable. At first Ferdinando and Pietro de' Medici paid her visits and tried to console and cheer her, and Ferdinando obtained from the Pope permission for the convent rules to be relaxed in her favour—a permission immediately vetoed by Francesco, who was furious when he discovered how his wishes had been ignored. But here the brothers had a double end to gain. They were sorry for Cammilla most assuredly, but, beyond that, she was the friend of the Grand Duchess, and in her hysterical excitement she might perchance betray some secret or other which it might be useful for them to know. But Cammilla betrayed nothing, or knew nothing, and presently even the two stepsons left her to herself. Already, three months after Virginia's marriage, in

May 1586, Don Pietro wrote to his brother in Rome that their stepmother was now undoubtedly mad and altogether in the hands of priests and physicians, and that she raved of any one and anything that entered her disordered mind, pouring out torrents of abuse at Francesco and revealing matters that had better remain hidden.

When the Cardinal Ferdinando himself succeeded to the throne in the following year he had Cammilla removed to the village of Lappeggi, a few miles out of Florence. The change to the freedom of the country, where she could gaze over the smiling hills and roam through the fields and vineyards, did wonders towards restoring her health, both mental and physical, but it was too late now to hope for a real cure. Unfortunately she did not realise this, and with renewed bodily strength the old longing for a second marriage and a fresh start in life reasserted itself. But Cammilla was now forty-three years old, and her state of health made this impossible. Had it been several years earlier the well-disposed Ferdinando would have found a suitable alliance for her gladly, but now the only thing to be done was to see that the widow of the great Cosimo brought no disgrace on his name by committing some act of folly.

So, after more than a year of liberty, back to the guardianship of Santa Monaca went poor Cammilla, though not to the rigorous confinement of Francesco's time. When Ferdinando himself got married, in May 1589, she was invited to the Pitti for several days, and then at last she seemed to realise the vanity of her hopes, the hard fact that the pleasures she had so loved had passed out of her reach for ever. The poor brain, which had never been fit to grasp the deeper facts of life, gave way again, and Cammilla was taken back to her convent never more to issue thence until a year later she, too, was borne to her last resting-place in the crypt of San Lorenzo.

CHAPTER XXV

THE LAST QUARREL

Donna Virginia's marriage to Don Cesare d'Este was, unfortunately, not productive of all the good results hoped for. The presence together of the three Medici brothers proved a greater strain than the fragile fabric of family peace could stand. As has already been seen, traitorous influences had been at work poisoning the Grand Duke's mind against his brothers, especially against Ferdinando, whilst Don Pietro, still hotly indignant at the imposal of Francesco's authority and the exclusion of his fair Spanish friend from court circles, threw himself entirely on the side of his younger brother, and desired nothing more ardently than a chance of being revenged on Francesco and his wife.

Fresh disputes concerning money matters, fresh refusals on the part of the Grand Duke to pay his brother's debts had not failed to occur; and last but not least, the just indignation of the two younger at the elder's treatment of the unhappy Cammilla Martelli and his insistence on sending her back to her prison in spite of all their urgent prayers, had brought about another breach which really seemed to be worse than any that had yet occurred. Ferdinando returned abruptly to Rome, and Pietro would have sailed for Spain had not a new reason suddenly appeared for the postponement of his departure.

And this reason was the rumour which became current in Florence and was generally believed, that the Grand Duchess was really at last about to have another child.

The fainting fits to which Bianca was subject had several

times caused the report to be circulated that her hopes of an heir were likely to be fulfilled. But always the illness had passed off, and the hopes had vanished with it. One night in the previous November she had been taken so ill that her life had been despaired of for hours; the doctors said the cause was merely a chill contracted when out hunting, but after each succeeding attack she recovered more slowly and her health visibly declined. Nevertheless, her strength of will was such that as soon as she was able to get out of bed and stand upright she declared that she was cured, and went about as though nothing ailed her. Hence the scepticism with which her illnesses were regarded; the people looked on them as mere pretence and, as usual, made coarse and satirical jokes. But her sufferings were only too real, as real as the courage and self-control with which she bore them, for she knew well enough what would happen were she to sink into chronic invalidism.

This time, however, there really seemed to be good ground for the report which circulated again immediately after Donna Virginia's wedding. Francesco was nearly crazy with delight; he would admit of no doubts, and the whole episode of Antonio's birth was forgotten in his new pleasure and excitement. But Bianca herself was tormented by uncertainty, as she believed herself to be merely in the early stages of some serious malady, and only she herself knew what she had endured so long. She clung to hope, however, the doctors reassured her, and the court spoke of the expected heir as an actual fact, though the city still was sceptical.

Having learnt caution by previous disappointments, Francesco and Bianca did not immediately inform Ferdinando of the new hopes; but when he heard the news from Pietro and from his private agents, it cannot be wondered at if his suspicions were instantly aroused, the silence preserved towards him by the Grand Duke in a matter so urgent to the State in itself suggesting some fresh intrigue of Bianca's. Neither he nor Don Pietro believed that Bianca was capable of ever bearing another child, and in their opinion, there-

fore, it was only a question of guarding against a second imposture.

Since Ferdinando neither could nor would himself come back to Florence, he charged Don Pietro to postpone his departure in order to keep a private watch on Bianca. Pietro was very anxious to return to Spain, but in deference to his brother's wishes he made excuses to Francesco for the delay, and assumed the office of family watch-dog. But the young man lacked two qualities essential for the successful fulfilment of this difficult office, namely, the art of concealing his intentions and the power of remaining an apparently unmoved spectator of events to which he was by no means indifferent.

Don Pietro's rank, his power of free and unquestioned entry into the palace at all times, and his secret means of pursuing his investigations gave him unrivalled opportunities for keeping his eye on affairs. But he was so prejudiced against Bianca, and so persuaded that she meant mischief, that he saw nothing but deception and trickery on all sides, and soon thought he had found the secret of the new imposture in preparation. Ferdinando had bidden him watch carefully in order that the one great deception which they both feared might not be carried out undiscovered; but in his distrust of his sister-in-law Pietro's zeal outran the mark, and he looked on her as an already convicted criminal, basing his belief on proofs which even the Cardinal, more just and reasonable with all his fears, could not accept. Pietro even suspected Bianca's daughter, the Countess Bentivoglio, of being her mother's accomplice, and his desire for revenge and his personal interests combined made him hasten to communicate the precious secret and his own imagined discovery of the new plot to his brother with all speed.

Pellegrina, it seems, was really expecting a child, and during the absence of her husband she was visiting her mother and stepfather in Florence. Now Pietro was firmly convinced that the absence of Count Ulisse had been arranged at this

time on purpose, that it was intended to conceal Pellegrina's condition, or spread the report that she had miscarried, and then, when the time came, to represent the younger woman's infant as being that of the elder. The rooms assigned to Pellegrina at the Pitti communicated with the apartments of the Grand Duchess, and the numerous doors and passages in the palace would afford every facility for carrying out the imposture; moreover the absence from home of Pellegrina's husband (too opportune to be accidental, thought the amateur detective), furnished a good excuse for her remaining with her mother. Under these circumstances, Pietro perceived that his presence would be no sort of hindrance to Bianca, but would rather be favourable to the success of her plot, and he begged again for permission to depart.

'I promised your Eminence to remain here to see the end of this matter,' wrote Pietro to the Cardinal, after having set forth the state of things at the Pitti. 'but seeing that time, place and opportunity do favour their designs, it is scarce possible that my presence here can prevent them. Because of the many doors, no place could be more fitted for the carrying out of their plans; the having Pellegrina in the house giveth them their opportunity, and there is no doubt that the Grand Duke would rather give the inheritance unto his wife's grandchild than unto one of us. Wherefore your Eminence must consider in what manner my presence here can be profitable. Rather will it be hurtful unto us, for they will carry out their designs in spite of me, and I shall thus be forced to make as though I perceived not the disaster which will have befallen us; and seeing this, the world will not inquire into the matter, but will accept my presence as a proof of the truth of the birth. Wherefore, if it please your Eminence, I will return into Spain upon the earliest opportunity.'

Although various innovations in the palace, new guards, gates shutting off staircases, and the total inaccessibility of the grand ducal pair, seemed to furnish some grounds for Pietro's suspicions and although he knew for certain of

Francesco's request to Philip for the investiture of Don Antonio with the state of Siena, thereby defrauding his own brothers, the just and cautious Ferdinando still could not accept the theory of Pellegrina without further and more convincing proof.

Such a piece of deception, he wrote back, would require such openness and precision of time, place and persons as to be wellnigh impossible. 'And although I do desire that she should be carefully observed, ye must use your eyes in other places as well and not only upon her. There are women of low estate who do bring forth in hidden corners, and of such do they make use who desire to do these things.'

So Pietro was bidden stay on in Florence, to his own great disgust and the annoyance of Francesco and Bianca. Naturally, taking their cue from the sovereigns, the courtiers and favourites treated him with as scant courtesy as they dared, and the reason of his presence there was discussed with thinly veiled insults and calumnies. At last even his promise could hardly restrain him, and he told Ferdinando that any other place, no matter how horrible, would seem a paradise to him in comparison with his brother's court under existing circumstances.

To add to the general unpleasantness, the spring that year of 1586 was the worst on record for sixty years, cold and wet and windy, and the rains continued till the month of July, so that again the corn went up in price and the usual races on the Feast of St. John the Baptist could not be run on account of the heavy downpour. Pietro chafed and fretted at his loss of time, Francesco's temper grew each day more uncertain, and even Bianca herself could scarcely keep up her wonted energy and spirits. Whatever her secret plans may have been, whether or not she was guilty of the intentions her brothers-in law imputed to her, she was certainly ill, and the burden of the constant fight for life weighed heavily upon her.

One compliment came to vary the monotony of the people's animosity and satire; the Pope sent her the Golden Rose to mark his appreciation of her negotiations in the cause of public peace. As has been related, the election of Cardinal Montalto to the papacy was largely due to the exertions of Ferdinando de' Medici, and, in return for Francesco's help in exterminating the bandits who infested the papal states, Sixtus undertook to effect a reconciliation with Venice, so necessary for the safety of Italy. Bianca was overjoyed, though her satisfaction proved to be premature. She and Francesco had intended to visit Venice soon after their marriage, but the plan had to be postponed on account of her illness; then Francesco declared that he would enter no state at enmity with King Philip, for fear of that monarch's anger; subsequently it was announced that Bianca would go there alone for the carnival of 1581, but then the political disagreement stood in the way. And thus her ardent desire to return in prosperity and triumph to her native city, whence she had fled in fear and disgrace, was destined never to be fulfilled.

On the election of Sixtus Bianca had sent him a magnificent gift—all the vessels necessary for the service of the altar in massive gold, wonderfully worked, and studded with gems, together with a complete set of sacerdotal vestments of rich brocade gorgeously embroidered, and church linen adorned with the finest lace. Most of the needlework had been executed at the convent of Santa Monaca, under the supervision of Cammilla, and Sixtus was overwhelmed by the splendour of the gift, regretting that the poverty of the church prevented him from making a more adequate return than a fragment of the wood of the True Cross enclosed in a gold ring. But Bianca declared herself amply rewarded and placed the precious relic on her private altar, proclaiming it more valuable than any worldly wealth.

Now on the Feast of the Ascension, which was the 15th May, the Archbishop of Sorrento, a Piedmontese named Donzella, arrived in Florence bringing the Pope's gift to

the Grand Duchess. On account of Bianca's health, and to save her fatigue, the ceremony of presentation took place privately in the chapel of the Pitti Palace. The Archbishop made his solemn entry into Florence on horseback, carrying the Golden Rose in his hand. But, unfortunately, either because the good Nuncio was an unskilful rider or else because he had a restive horse, he dropped the precious emblem and it was broken in two or three pieces. It was picked out of the mud and carried to the Palace by a priest on foot, but the populace regarded the accident as a bad omen. The Grand Duchess rose from her bed to go to the chapel, where both the Grand Duke and the Cardinal of Florence were present at the ceremony. The Archbishop received a gift of five hundred gold scudi, most of which he gave to the nuns of the Murate; 'an act of generosity,' says Settimanni, 'which savoureth neither of a priest nor a Piedmontese!'

The situation at the Pitti, however, could not continue much longer. In spite of Ferdinando's admonitions as to caution, Pietro imprudently confided to some intimates the real reason of his prolonged stay at the Florentine court. This was, of course, repeated to Serguidi, ever on the watch to foment the animosity against Ferdinando, and he promptly revealed to the Grand Duke the secret espionage exercised by his two brothers. Then came a terrible outburst of rage. Francesco's anger knew no bounds, even venting itself on Bianca for having given grounds for such suspicions. He sent Pellegrina away from the Pitti, made a minute and personal examination of his wife's apartments, ordered all the private doors to be locked and himself took possession of the keys. Nobody should be able to accuse him of accepting a second Antonio!

This was the first time that Francesco's anger had ever been turned upon the woman who had held him in the hollow of her hand for so many years, for the first time he included her in his sweeping distrust of all around him. In such natures as his, fiery love is near akin to hatred as

furious, and she had always known what to expect if anything should drive his feelings for her over that dangerous line. Now it was as though a chasm of destruction yawned at her feet when she thought of what he might do in his rage and disappointment if the expected heir should never arrive. Had evil tongues prevailed and forced him to remember her past life, to suspect for one instant that she might really have intended to repeat the once successful trick?

But now Francesco determined to put an end to the nuisance of Pietro's presence in Florence. He sent Serguidi to tell him that a galley lay then in the port of Genoa on the point of sailing for Spain, and bade him hasten his preparations for departure, as the opportunity was too good to be lost, thus showing plainly that he wished him gone, and that speedily! Pietro was on the horns of a dilemma between the commands of his two brothers, and was more than ever convinced that he was right in his surmises. Now Bianca sent for him to take farewell, and when he protested that he would be neglecting his duty were he to leave before the birth of her child, she assured him that she was ill and that the heir existed only in the Grand Duke's imagination. Pietro could do no less than accept this declaration of the Grand Duchess, which he duly reported to Ferdinando; and holding that he had now fulfilled the service required of him by the Cardinal, he asked for no further permission and quitted Italy at once, to the unfeigned relief of both himself and his unwilling host.

Francesco was furious with his brothers, and reproached Ferdinando in particular bitterly for his scepticism, demanding that he should return to Florence in December to be present at the birth of the expected child, of whose advent he himself would admit no shadow of doubt. His indignation was only increased by Ferdinando's reply, that, though he had promised Bianca he would come to please her, he would require proofs of her good faith before he undertook the journey. Whereupon a correspondence ensued, full of

bitter reproaches on one side and dignified restraint and brotherly warning on the other, and Ferdinando withdrew from the contest and maintained silence on the unpleasant subject, until time cleared up all doubts by proving Bianca to be only in the early stages of the disease which eventually caused her death.

Notwithstanding all accusations and many suspicious circumstances, Bianca seems to have acted honestly throughout this final quarrel between the brothers; for, confused by many physicians, each more ignorant than the other, and mentally and physically weary, she herself knew not what to believe as to her own state. But the more bitter Francesco grew against the Cardinal, the more eagerly did she redouble her friendliness and volunteer proofs of confidence and sincerity. She had realised the impossibility of establishing Antonio as heir to the throne of Tuscany, and knew the vital importance of standing well with her powerful brother-in-law. She had managed, therefore, to avoid being drawn into the new quarrel, and had throughout maintained a friendly and apparently truthful correspondence with the Cardinal, which now alone made possible that final reconciliation which saved this tempestuous family from providing a fresh scandal for Europe.

For Ferdinando and Pietro it must be said, however, that in view of Bianca's former imposture they had every justification for their treatment of her. Her character and resourcefulness were too well known for her deeds or words to be accepted at their face-value, and her apparent candour might in reality be only one way of throwing dust in the Cardinal's eyes.

The publicity given to this purely domestic matter had brought the Medici into fresh contempt and ridicule, and had seriously injured the reputations of both brothers at the papal court. In any case Francesco was held in no great esteem there, and by the death of the Cardinal d'Este in 1586 Ferdinando had lost his most powerful supporter. All his enemies seized this opportunity to undermine the

Medici influence, and even Sixtus V., who had every reason to show gratitude, made the strife between the brothers an excuse for refusing them their rights. A new cardinal being about to be elected just then, the candidate put forward by the Grand Duke was the only one the Pope declined to accept, and to Ferdinando's complaints he vouchsafed only the curt reply that, since he could not make peace with his brother, he must rest content with such favours as he had already received at the papal court.

Deeply wounded in his personal pride and furious at the insult offered to his great name and House, Ferdinando saw clearly that the only way by which he could retrieve his position was by a speedy and lasting reconciliation with Francesco. Therefore, swallowing his rage at the course into which he was driven, for he naturally looked upon her as the original cause of all the trouble, he decided to use Bianca again as mediator, for she alone could influence Francesco; and moreover peace was as much to her interests as to his own. And so he wrote to her plainly, bidding her do her best. In this respect he was ready to acknowledge her ability and claim her help in confuting the slanderers who had worked the mischief, using as their bond of union ambition for the House of which they were both members.

Bianca needed no second invitation to join hands with Ferdinando, and she judged the object at which they aimed not to be as difficult to attain as he supposed.

'For some days past,' she wrote back to him, 'I have remarked in the Grand Duke none of those evil impressions which ye do fear, but the most kindly disposition towards you in all his conversations. This doth make me think that the slanderers are fallen out of favour . . . and we can prove unto the Grand Duke that our common object is to do all for the profit of the family. Thus will all occasion for slander and mockery cease, and I can do without hindrance whatsoever shall further your peace and contentment.'

And in her surmises as to Francesco's changing disposition Bianca was not far wrong. As has been said, the

Grand Duke was weak, but far from stupid, and when his first rage had passed he fully realised all the disastrous consequences of this last and worst family quarrel, and was deeply troubled by it. In these latter years he had grown increasingly gloomy and melancholy, and had withdrawn more and more from the society even of those with whom his daily routine brought him into necessary contact. He even altered his mode of life, rarely leaving the palace, and spending the greater part of the day in his laboratories or picture galleries, becoming almost invisible and only granting audiences with the utmost reluctance. During that wet summer, when the Arno water was not fit for use and food was almost at famine prices, Francesco constantly tried to escape from business worries and interviews by retiring to Pratolino, where he shut himself up amidst his grottos and fountains with Bianca as sole companion.

It was reported that the Grand Duke's retirement and melancholy were caused by the family discord and by the vile and obscene libels and jokes which were constantly found attached to the church doors or other public places, reflecting infamously on both himself and Bianca. Don Pietro was suspected of being the author of some of these libels, and, though it was never proved, it was like his vindictive and malicious character to do such things. But ill-health was fastening on Francesco as it was on Bianca, and was responsible for a great deal. He had now become so depressed and irritable that his servants were afraid to enter his presence. Since his serious illness of 1579 he had never regained his former strength, but he always pretended to be in perfect health, subjected himself to great exertions, swam in the Arno, ate and drank enormously, preferring highly spiced and indigestible food and strong and heating wines; and in spite of his love for Bianca, he conducted various amorous intrigues, like all of his race, heeding neither the advice of his physicians nor the prayers of his wife, who was forced to hide her rage and endure these fleeting infidelities with a good grace.

Now that ill-health and disappointment had lowered his pride Francesco was the more likely to yield to persuasion, but Bianca knew full well that by reason of this very irritability he would need careful management. She therefore called in to her assistance the Cardinal Archbishop of Florence, Alessandro de' Medici, for whom Francesco entertained both affection and respect, because he had never joined the ranks of his enemies, but had always shown the strictest impartiality and justice and done his best to promote peace. Fearlessly this good prelate pointed out how Ferdinando had always striven for the honour and greatness of the House, and how the quarrels had all arisen from Francesco's belief in the favourites who had fanned the flame of discord for their own advantage, and he bade the Grand Duke recall his brother and treat him as a real brother and true friend. Bianca told of the Cardinal's desire for reconciliation, and their combined representations, added to his own secret conviction that he had been unjust to his brother, crowned their mission with complete success, and Bianca was bidden tell the Cardinal of Francesco's goodwill and beg him to seal the compact by coming to Florence without delay.

Matters now went smoothly ahead and the terms of the reconciliation were arranged. Both brothers agreed entirely to forget the past; in all state and family business they were henceforth to work together in equal unity; under guise of a loan the Grand Duke was to pay certain of the Cardinal's most pressing debts, and Ferdinando accepted the invitation to join the Florentine court when it moved to the Villa of Poggio a Cajano in the early autumn.

The brothers being now official friends, the Pope resumed his former favourable attitude towards the Medici. This expert in court intrigues was highly pleased with the manner in which Bianca had grappled with a difficult situation, and declared her to be an adept in diplomacy. Sixtus V. was ever a friend of all who, in spite of adverse fate and circumstances, had raised themselves to high positions through their exertions or cunning, and he had always kept

an interested eye on Bianca. It was probably his desire to meet this woman of many adventures that prompted his decision to pay Francesco a visit this same year. He wanted to go to Padua, in order, as he said, to thank St. Anthony for his assistance in exterminating the bands of robbers who had infested the papal states at the commencement of his reign. The various Italian princes through whose domains he would have to travel had all issued invitations to his Holiness, but only that of the Grand Duke of Tuscany had been accepted, though whether as a coadjutor of St. Anthony or for his own sake is not clear! Great preparations were made for the worthy reception of this remarkable guest; but the favour shown to Francesco had not only aroused the utmost jealousy of the disappointed princes, but had even drawn a remonstrance from the King of Spain. So Sixtus postponed his visit indefinitely, and the tragedy which followed soon after these events caused it to be abandoned altogether.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE END OF STRIFE

The summer of 1587 was merging into autumn when the court moved out to spend the last and perhaps the most trying weeks of the hot weather at Poggio a Cajano, where Francesco could enjoy the excellent hunting on the estate and Bianca could regain her strength amongst the cool avenues of the beautiful gardens, now in all their glory of luxuriant foliage and brilliant autumn colouring.

At last there really seemed to be a prospect of enduring family peace, and for the moment the Medici brothers were not interfering with each other's affairs. The suspicious and turbulent Pietro was in Spain; young Giovanni had left Florence to join the war in Flanders, and Ferdinando had announced his great visit of reconciliation for the middle of September. The time of family strife, accusations, calumnies, plot and counter-plot seemed to be over, and everything promised a peaceful future.

The Venetian fugitive, the splendid mistress of a reigning prince, the Grand Duchess unrivalled in knowledge of intrigue and politics, had come to long for domestic peace and family concord as the most important thing of all. Bianca had learnt her lesson, but she had learnt it too late.

Ferdinando arrived from Rome on the 25th September, and was received by his brother and sister-in-law with a warmth which completely dispelled all outward semblance of bitterness. The mutual promises were confirmed, and the chief members of the great House of Medici once more walked hand in hand. Francesco begged the Cardinal's

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THE VILLA OF POGGIO A CAJANO

forgiveness for his former harshness, and Ferdinando declared himself ready to forget all unkindness, provided only that Francesco recognised his innocence of the disloyalty attributed to him, and his readiness to promote in every way the honour and glory of his family. As for Bianca, she did her utmost to entertain the Cardinal as the most honoured of all guests; and in the splendid mansion on the hill, surrounded by its thick woods and elaborate pleasure-grounds, set like an oasis in the plain of the Val d'Arno, now scorched and brown after the long summer heat, the three strange companions, the woman and two men, feasted together and showed each other affection and respect. And two at least, the hostess and the guest, watched each other's every move with secret feelings still unchanged.

But a few days later these delightful excursions, these reunions and banquets at which all Florence, so long unused to domestic gaiety on the part of the sovereigns, stared amazed, were rudely interrupted, and over the family party, which had been joined by Pellegrina and her husband and the good Cardinal Alessandro, loomed the dark shadow of a mightier guest than all.

On the 10th October it was known in the city that the Grand Duke had been seized with sudden illness, that he had grown rapidly worse, then that the Grand Duchess had fallen a victim to the same malady. Then it was told that both had died within a few hours of each other.

This tragedy must be classed, with others of the House of Medici, as one in which truth and tradition tell different tales, concerning which, even after the lapse of centuries, the popular belief refuses to accept the simple explanation of natural causes established by medical facts.

The suddenness of the event, the presence of Ferdinando, certain circumstances which were not explained, and the ready belief accorded by the populace at all times to tales of horror, caused the wildest stories to be disseminated, stories which were all the more eagerly accepted because the dead sovereigns were hated and their subjects were willing to

think that they had died violent deaths. This new reconciliation between the Medici brothers meant nothing to the Florentines; the same thing had happened before, inevitably followed by another quarrel, and Bianca in their eyes was a woman who never had and never would work aught save evil. So out of the first horror-struck and vague conjectures repeated from mouth to mouth, and gaining in bulk and detail with each repetition, there grew the story which even to-day the custodian of the very scene of the tragedy repeats as indisputable. And thus it is told in the *Fatti Tragici* with all circumstance and detail; the old writer shared the common belief that Bianca's one aim was to rid herself of her arch-enemy in the only sure way.

This lady, so clever and so hated, says the tale, one morning made a tart with her own hands (no unusual thing for even the greatest lady in those days, when sweet-making was one of the accomplishments always taught to girls), and into this tart she mixed a deadly poison. Now the Cardinal Ferdinando wore upon his finger a ring set with a precious stone which had the power of changing colour whenever it came near anything poisonous, and he, having his suspicions, glanced at his ring as each fresh dish was brought to table. When at the end of the dinner Bianca's poisoned tart appeared with much other confectionery, Ferdinando observed that his stone immediately became dull and clouded; instantly he realised what piece of treachery had been prepared for him, and suspected, moreover, that his brother was a party to the intended crime. But, apparently unmoved, he continued the conversation with a smiling face, only refusing with compliments and excuses Francesco's invitation to partake of the tart specially prepared in his honour by the Grand Duchess herself. At last Francesco took a knife and cut it, saying that if nobody else would try it, he would be the first, and he took a piece and ate it. When she saw what her husband had done, terror entered into Bianca's soul, for she was utterly helpless. If she snatched the tart from Francesco's hand she betrayed the

dreadful treachery at once, and, moreover, she knew that such was the potency of the drug that the mischief was done with the first mouthful he had eaten. So instantly she stretched out her hand and took a piece herself, preferring to die with the Grand Duke than survive him and suffer the Cardinal's vengeance. For a little while the innocent Francesco continued to talk and eat; then suddenly dreadful pain overtook both him and Bianca, and they were carried to their apartments and placed on their beds, while frightened servants ran hither and thither in search of physicians and remedies. But the Cardinal in his wrath stood sentinel at the door, a pistol in each hand and his own servants behind him, so that none might enter in and render aid to the miserable couple who lay dying in agony. And when they were dead he gave them honourable burial, and it was given out that there had been no remedy for that poison, so powerful and so copious had been the dose.

Thus the tale in the *Fatti Tragici*. But assuredly if it were true, if Bianca at the last did really undo her own work with such desperate risks, the Cardinal had no need of a magic ring to put him on his guard. He and his sister-in-law knew each other's mind with the accuracy of hatred, and not even she could watch her husband's fatal act with a face so unmoved that that keen eye would not detect her.

But there were many versions of this tale, and none too wild for the credulity of the people. Some said that it was Ferdinando who had put poison into the tart, a thing more improbable still; and yet another tradition says that though Bianca was the culprit and Francesco died of her deed, she spared herself, only to be forced afterwards when she lay in bed to drink a medicine sent her by Ferdinando to calm her nerves and make her sleep, as he said, but the sleep was the sleep from which none ever wake.

Repeated from mouth to mouth and in novels and plays, such reports have survived and taken roots which no historian can eradicate, even though the plain facts of the tragedy are authenticated beyond any doubt.

Francesco had helped to ruin his health by foolish extravagance in all sorts of pleasures and exercises, and his habit of eating highly spiced and indigestible dishes and drinking new and heating wines had caused stomach troubles, which he made much worse by prescribing for himself his own concoctions and drinking enormous quantities of iced water and milk and syrups at all times of the day and night. Therefore it is not surprising if these habits, combined with the real complaints from which he suffered, rendered him an easy victim to any sort of fever.

On the 6th October the whole court had started at daybreak for a deer hunt in the immense park attached to the grand ducal villa. Francesco and Ferdinando were both mounted, the air was warm and heavy, and a long and fatiguing chase wearied the Grand Duke unusually. The next day the brothers drove to the neighbouring estate of La Magia; here his imprudence in drinking hot grape juice from the pressing-vats and then superintending the felling of trees in the broiling sun immediately after dinner threw Francesco into such a heated condition that he committed the further folly of going to get cool in the shadiest alley of the garden, where a fountain rendered the ground damp and chill, and drinking freely of the water there. He returned to Poggio a Cajano and took to his bed, but even then refused to obey the doctors' orders, eating and drinking what he wanted and persisting in sitting up to transact business until fever made him too weak to move.

The only person who could have had any influence over Francesco was Bianca, and she herself lay ill in bed with the same pains and symptoms. Pellegrina did her best, it is true, and watched beside her stepfather till the end, but his illness made such rapid progress that he was soon beyond mortal aid. By Sunday Francesco knew he was dying; in haste that night his confessor was sent for from Florence, and to him in the grey light of dawn Francesco I. de' Medici made his last confession. Then he sent for his brother, who was waiting in the next room, and gave into his hands the keys

of the treasury and fortresses, imploring him in a voice now scarcely audible to act kindly towards Bianca and Antonio, and to rule justly over his subjects. Ferdinando promised all the dying man asked, and ere long began a terrible death agony that lasted fourteen hours, with struggles and cries dreadful for his attendants to witness. At last his bodily strength failed, then he lost consciousness, and two hours later died the Grand Duke Francesco, in the forty-seventh year of his age.

Meanwhile, in an adjoining apartment, Bianca lay mortally ill of the same kind of fever, brought on in her case by much the same kind of imprudence and aggravated by the October mists arising from the marshy and unhealthy plains which surrounded the estate of Poggio a Cajano. She did not quickly realise her own condition, and would have risen from her bed to wait on her husband had the physicians not restrained her. To the bodily suffering of fever was added in her case a mental anguish more fatal to her still. Francesco's illness had been recognised as serious from the first, and she feared to leave him for an instant in the sole care of others. And as she lay helpless herself and heard from hour to hour how the danger grew and hope faded, she fell into utter despair. Her courage had been such as few women possess; but when she thought of a future without Francesco, without a friend (save perchance the Pope, who might protect her), surrounded by those on whom her arts and charms would have no effect and who would gladly vent their spite on her for her successes of the past, when she realised that the happiest fate she could hope for if she survived would be imprisonment in a convent like Cammilla, then death seemed the less bitter fate of the two. Had she succeeded in establishing Antonio as the legitimate heir she could have looked ahead with hope, for the boy was to her as a son; but as it was, if Francesco died, she had better go with him.

So Bianca passed the last Sunday of her life, racked by physical pain, dumbly raging at the satisfaction of her

enemies, at her own short-lived triumph, her last wrecked ambition for the future, and perhaps, who shall say, tormented by remorse and by useless regret for the lost innocence of Venetian days. None dared to tell her the truth about Francesco, but from the faces round her bed she guessed it only too well; Pellegrina and the physicians, her priests and her women, obeyed the order given by Ferdinando that she should be kept in ignorance. But such commands were in vain, and when, directly Francesco had ceased to breathe, Ferdinando went to Bianca's bedside before he left for Florence and spoke words of encouragement to her, she only thanked him and commended to his care Antonio and her household. At daybreak they brought her the last Sacraments, for she was sinking fast, and weeping she sent a message to her husband, telling of her love and asking his forgiveness, for still she did not know that he was already dead.

But she knew soon now. In order to conceal from the dying woman the presence of the necessary workmen in the house, the body of Francesco had been carried downstairs to a ground-floor room (that one now shown as the room of Bianca), but the unwonted footsteps in the corridors, the carriages driving to and fro outside, the disturbed faces of her attendants told as plainly as words what had happened. None dared speak to confirm or deny. The blow had fallen, and all Bianca's world had slipped from her; she gave one long moan, cried through her clenched teeth, 'And now must I die with my lord!' and fell into an agony from which in a few minutes death released her.

So passed from this world Bianca Cappello, Grand Duchess of Tuscany, Daughter of the Venetian Republic; and as the smoke of a candle when the flame is extinguished, so did her name vanish from the lips of men and her traces from the city where she had reigned.

CHAPTER XXVII

AFTERWARDS

On the evening of the 20th October an imposing funeral procession moved along the road from Poggio a Cajano to Florence; Francesco de' Medici was coming back to his own city for the last time. A great company of the highest in the state surrounded the black velvet bier, the heavy gold fringe of which swayed and glittered in the light of fifty waxen torches. All the city went out far beyond the gate to meet the dead prince, the bells of all the churches tolled, and there was no house, however humble, that did not set a light in its window. The cortège wound its way through the seething streets, through Borgo Ognissanti, along the Lung' Arno to Santa Trinità, then up by the Via dei Cerretani and Via Martelli to San Lorenzo, where knights of the Order of San Stefano took the coffin on their shoulders and bore it into the church, laying it in front of the high altar beneath an immense canopy of rich black velvet. The next day, dressed in regal attire, the crown on his head, the sceptre in his hand, his sword at his side and his robes of Grand Master of the Order of San Stefano spread out at his feet, the dead Medici lay in state beneath the canopy, holding his last reception of his subjects, who crowded into the church to gaze and wonder at the strange manner of the Grand Duke's death.

And twenty-four hours later, on the evening of the 21st, the same bier again entered the city of Florence, with the body of Bianca Cappello beneath its sable hood. Again the clergy met it at the gate, again the streets were lighted as it passed, its silent burden was borne to the same church and

placed where that other body had lain the night before; but there the repetition ceased. When the brief office for the dead had been read over her, the dead Bianca, clothed in widow's garb, was carried immediately out of the church into the sacristy, there to await the orders of the new Grand Duke as to the ultimate disposal of her body.

When Ferdinando had left Poggio a Cajano directly after his brother's death to take possession of the city and receive the oath of fealty from the military, Bianca was still alive. On hearing next day that she also had passed away, he sent orders that the autopsy was to be carried out at the villa, as had been already done in Francesco's case, but that Pellegrina and her husband and all who had been present at the death should likewise witness the opening of the body. Sixtus V. had once remarked to Ferdinando, 'When your sister-in-law the Grand Duchess comes to die, then many tongues will wag,' and it happened just as that astute prelate foretold. It was for his own protection that Ferdinando had insisted on the presence of relatives and doctors at the autopsy, which revealed extensive disease of many organs as well as an advanced state of dropsy, causes enough for a natural death; but his precaution was in vain, and it was impossible to prevent tongues wagging on a subject the full truth of which can never be known.

What reason had Ferdinando now to dissemble his real feelings towards his sister-in-law? By nature upright and just, hard only upon those whom he considered deserved his scorn, his actions now immediately betrayed his real attitude towards her of whom he henceforth never spoke save as *la pessima Bianca*. When Buontalenti, who had charge of the funeral arrangements, asked if she should wear the grand ducal crown in her coffin, he replied that she had worn it already too long, and when further requested to indicate where she should be buried, he curtly answered, 'Wherever ye shall choose, but we will not have her amongst us.'

So that same night, without further ceremony or honours of any kind, in silence and darkness, Bianca was buried in

the precincts of San Lorenzo, and none can point with certainty to the place where she lies.

But in 1902, while constructing a new entrance for the 'Confraternity of the Sacrament,' in a courtyard opening onto the Piazza Madonna, beneath the arches and close against the outer wall of the crypt where lie the princes, the workmen accidentally broke into a vault inside which was a common wooden coffin. This was found to contain the body of a woman with fair hair and clothed in plain robes, probably of cloth, but on account of decay it was impossible to determine the material. There was no inscription or means of identification on the coffin, and that the body found was that of Bianca cannot be affirmed with absolute certainty, but everything points to the fact that it was hers. That she was interred in San Lorenzo is known beyond any doubt, and this was the only tomb ever found apart from the others and bearing no inscription, a significant detail, for had the body not been that of an important personage it would have been placed in the common burying-place in the crypt, where many bodies were buried together. Perhaps on that night when Ferdinando had bidden them lay her where they liked, only not amongst the Medici with whom she had been already too long, those who bore her away were touched with pity for the dead woman, perhaps had received some bounty at her hands, and placed her where at least only a wall divided her from her husband; near the Medici indeed, but not one with them, an outcast still in death as actually she had always been in life. The tomb was immediately closed up again with stone slabs, and a rough cross was cut in the pavement to mark the position of this the last resting-place of Bianca—the last and perchance the first where her striving, unquiet spirit ever found real repose.

But even this secret and ignoble interment of her who for nine years had worn the grand ducal crown, his brother's lawful wife, did not satisfy the bitterness of the Cardinal Grand Duke. By his orders all portraits and records of her

were removed, inscriptions relating to her and even her coat-of-arms were erased, and where the Medici and Cappello arms appeared quartered together the latter were effaced and those of Giovanna of Austria replaced instead. Only in one place in the city does a trace of Bianca still remain, for graved in stone over the door of the house in the Via Maggio, the house which Francesco gave her in Bonaventuri's lifetime, the scene of her most strenuous years, the arms of the Cappello family still remain to tell who once dwelt there.

Not in silence and secrecy did Bianca's lover go to his tomb. Ferdinando had arranged for Francesco a funeral the magnificence of which exceeded even that of Cosimo, and a procession which took four mortal hours to pass, and he was laid with all due state and pomp beside his first wife, Giovanna, in the burying-place of the Medici in the Church of San Lorenzo.

But if the new Grand Duke vented his hatred upon Bianca's inanimate body, he scrupulously observed the promises he had made her on her deathbed, and faithfully carried out the last wishes both of her and Francesco. Antonio and Pellegrina had been closest to Bianca's heart. To the former she left all her property, to the latter, already well provided for, she bequeathed a handsome legacy and jewels. By Ferdinando's kindness, Pellegrina was allowed to remain at the Pitti for a time, to look after the twelve-year-old Antonio and the young Princess Maria, the only child of Francesco still at home. But her behaviour, scheming and frivolous, soon made the Cardinal remember too sharply whose daughter she was, and after a few weeks she returned with her husband to Bologna. Ferdinando kept Antonio in his own care, but the boy was left under no illusions as to his position. By a formal act the new Grand Duke annulled all gifts and honours and inheritance bestowed on him by the late sovereign, and at the same time refused to recognise him as nephew and kinsman. But, having humbled him to the dust to show him what he

Photo Brogi

DON ANTONIO IN MANHOOD
Wearing the dress of the Knights of Malta

really was, Ferdinando immediately raised him up again, promising that so long as he proved docile and obedient to the new sovereign he should rank as a member of the family, and be under his own protection all his life. And the next day by a new act he gave back to the lad the splendid possessions left him by Francesco, which included the villas of Pratolino and La Magia and the house and garden of the Rucellai in the Via della Scala, the scene of Antonio's own first appearance in the tragic circle of the Medici. He was treated by his new guardian with the utmost kindness; but Ferdinando took no risks, there were to be no subsequent pretensions to the Tuscan throne, no questioning the succession of himself or his children; and therefore to avoid all eventual complications, when Antonio reached the age of eighteen he was obliged by the ex-Cardinal to enter the Order of the Knights of Malta and take its vows of perpetual celibacy.

The news of the double deaths in Florence was received in Venice with great surprise. But when the envoy sent to announce the sad event and Ferdinando's accession told merely the bare fact of Bianca's death and made no mention of obsequies, the Senate knew which course to take. The name of this last Daughter of the Republic was never mentioned in the city, her relatives were thrust back into the comparative obscurity from which only her position had raised them, and they were even forbidden to wear signs of mourning, for in no detail would the cautious Senate risk incurring the displeasure of the new Grand Duke. But Ferdinando was too great for such petty malice. Bartolommeo and Vettore were shocked, without a doubt, by the deaths of their august kindred, for they were receiving handsome allowances from Francesco, but their grief was speedily assuaged when they learnt that his successor generously intended to continue this bounty for the remainder of their lives.

. . . . . .

If Ferdinando's attitude towards the dead Bianca seemed

the mere outburst of long-repressed abhorrence, he had, alas, but too ample cause for the opinion he held of her. He had watched her, like a beautiful evil thing, creeping round Francesco from the time when first their eyes had met across the Square of San Marco, stupefying his conscience, using his weakness for her own ends, walking ruthless to her goal through crime and falsehood. Situated as they two were, Bianca and Ferdinando were doomed to conflict. If ambition was the ruling motive of one strong will, in the other it was that pride of race which would prevent at all costs the intrusion of such as she, and inevitably the two must clash. He had no thought for the disaster of her youth; her exquisite person, her wondrous charm which brought most men to her feet had no attraction for the Cardinal; he beheld in her only the unscrupulous wrecker of Giovanna's life, a convicted impostor, his brother's shame, and a deadly menace to his own future.

But she lived in an age of extremes, of heroic virtue and stupendous vice, a time hard to judge from the drab mediocrity of these modern days, and if her evil-doing was great, great also was her temptation and her opportunity. And one virtue at least was hers, that which Pope Sixtus so admired in her, namely, courage to fight overwhelming odds and singleness of purpose in pursuing one aim. For even if she loved Francesco only for what he represented (and who shall say?), she was strictly faithful to him throughout, and served him well and truly once she was his wife.

So ends the story of Bianca Cappello, beautiful, brilliant, clever beyond any woman of her time, who died a reigning princess in the land and lies buried in a nameless grave.

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